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# vertex

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fiction by Edward Bryant

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The most famous science fiction comic strip of all times returns on the pages of *Vertex*.

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# XENOPHOBE

fiction / STEVEN GOLDIN

artist / MONTE ROGERS

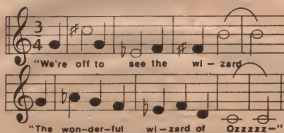


The beings from space could not have even conceived of such evil as could be found in the mind of one warped man intent on murder!

fiction / EDWARD BRYANT  
artist / GEORGE BARR

**They knew that Terminex  
was going to destroy  
Cinnabar—and Obregon  
wanted to find out why.**

# BRAIN TERMINAL



"The won-der-ful wi-zard of Ozzzzzz." The final note larched, shattered, collapsed. Timnath Obregon's expression was embarrassed. His gaunt frame was caught in an awkward flamingo pose, one foot hooked behind the calf of his freestanding leg. He smiled an automatic smile of vague apology though Tourmaline had demanded none.

Hair this night a caught torrent of violet crystal, the woman looked up from her sand-painting across the spacious bedroom. She said, "I don't recall having heard that song before."

"More of the cultural detritus I've skimmed from Terminex's memory vaults," said Obregon. "It's apparently an ancient folk tune."

"Who's the wizard?"

"I don't know."

"Where's Oz?"

"I have no idea."

Tourmaline frowned. "Your terrible singing's never bothered me," she said. "But I pray tomorrow's expedition ends more harmoniously."

"It must," said Obregon, "else no one'll be left in Cinnabar to appreciate any sort of music at all."

"Says Torre?" Tourmaline looked skeptical.

"Says Torre."

"How do you know that she knows?"

Obregon admitted, "To a degree, it's an act of faith."

"Timnath, I'm surprised you'd say that."

"Truthfully, I'm surprised as well." He said hopefully,

"She was right about Jack Burton's death, remember?"

"Vernilion, where is vernilion when I want it?" She

rummaged futilely through the clear containers, then

looked up. "Anyone could have predicted that horror."

Obregon shook his head stubbornly, staring through

the transparent wall and down at the lush garden.

"Torre knows things the rest of us cannot. I have a

feeling . . ."

"As do I. I think you're entering your mystical phase

in reaction to all that time spent with the Institute."

Tourmaline stood back from the painting frame and

dusted her thighs with a final gesture. "It will have

to wait until I find some vernilion."

"Don't wait too long," said Obregon softly.

"No." For a long while she looked at him intently.

Obregon said nothing more and did not move. He

watched the motionless trees in the adjacent botanic

garden. Night encroached, interlocking triangles of gar-

den dome increased their transparency automatically.

Slowly the brilliant hues of the foliage faded. "How

truly nice," said Tourmaline. "Isn't it?"

He said mechanically, "Yes, very."

"This magic forest. I may grow to like it better even

than my treehouse."

"Possibly."

Tourmaline crossed the room toward him. "Is it

upsetting that I don't appear to take this with proper

seriousness?"

He folded one angular arm around her shoulders.

"You'll sober when it becomes important enough. I

worry most for the rest of us in Cinnabar. The damned

city survives on inertia."

"When you entered, did you even notice my paint-

ing?"

Obregon, looking puzzled, shook his head. Tourmaline

led him back across the bedroom to the sand frame.

They contemplated the scene within the low enclosure.

"A burning city."

"It will be," said Tourmaline. "These past months,

I've had my own dreams."

"Then you know . . ."

"I suspect." She shrugged. "Perhaps they're no more

than dreams. Regardless, mightn't it be a healthy thing

for Cinnabar to finish?"

"Few in the city would even give a hearing to that

proposition."

"Yet you have," said Tourmaline. "Thus the morn-

ing's expedition."

"And you?"

"I want to go along." She nodded. "However things

turn out, I'll still have visited a new part of the city."

"You've got until the morning to change your mind."

"Until the morning," she mimicked. "Oh yes, I'll think

about it. There'll be so much time to think." At the

touch of Obregon's fingers, her hair kept its purple

tourmalinescence, but muted in texture from crystal to

fine silk.

In the morning it was Obregon's own inner clock

which snapped him awake and alert from a heavy,

dreamless sleep. Pre-dawn darkness softened the bed-

room's enclosing walls so that it seemed the occupants

float above the adjacent forest; Obregon did not

move, taking silent pleasure in each of the warm loca-

tions where Tourmaline's entwined limbs touched his.

Her breathing was light and regular. This, Obregon







G. Barr - 1975

reflected, was reason enough for saving Cinnabar. He thought vaguely about getting out of the quarter-gravity finite field and fixing some special breakfast; then he dozed off.

Tourmaline's own alarm woke them both an hour later. The finite field switched off, allowing each to sink with normal weight into the broad expanse of bed. Music from no apparent source began to play a dissonant brass symphony, volume increasing with elapsed time as Tourmaline mumbled and cradled her face in her arms.

"Good morning," Oregon said, touching her bare shoulders and kissing the back of her neck. Tourmaline groggily sat up and clapped her hands; the music ceased.

"What an awful morning," said Oregon, "bright and warm."

"All mornings are awful." She rubbed her eyes and yawned. "I should like some hot tea."

"We'll fix a large pot. Our friends look as though they also need some aid in waking up."

Tourmaline crawled to the edge of the bed and peered over. Through the now-transparent floor she saw a number of persons waiting on the ground level. She

waved; they waved back.

"Behold the rest of the expedition," said Oregon.

The expedition's roster was not lengthy. Besides Oregon and Tourmaline, there were three:

First, Torre. She was slight, almost fragile, deceptively child-like in her appearance. Coarse and curly red hair bushed untidily about her head. For a Cinnabar native, her skin was uncharacteristically pale; it tended to freckle whenever Torre ventured into the sun. Her face was smooth and unlined, save for the fine patterns of tiny wrinkles at the corners of each eye.

The eyes were what first caught the notice of those meeting her. Ranging from nearly transparent to almost black, all shades of ice were reflected in her eyes. It was psychic texture as well as hue, even in her closest contacts with other beings, Torre's looks were ultimately distracted. It seemed as though her field of vision were somehow wider than others—even Oregon's. She seldom discussed the sights denied others which she saw. Torre had once been less close-mouthed, but had discovered her words generated fear in those to whom she spoke. She had skirted social ostracism and found she did not enjoy isolation; she learned to edit judi-

ciously her revelations. She still made many in the city feel nervous.

It had occurred to her long before that she truly wished to leave Cinnabar and travel elsewhere; were there anywhere else to go. She dreamed often of standing in the forefront of an interminable queue waiting before a closed and locked door labeled "Escape." The door never opened; the file never moved. The people waited, Torre first.

Second, Jade Blue. Here was the catmother, the nearly perfect governess; hybrid of primate and feline. She was as massive, as articulate, perhaps more intelligent than the average human. Multiplying jointed so as to allow her to walk erect, she preferred the four-pawed gait of the cat. There was more of the cougar than the tabby in her carriage. Her body was a lithe system of long muscles, contained and covered with plush fur of softest blue.

She was not so much a member of an oppressed minority as she was, more practically, a blackmailed individual. These past years Oregon had found it increasingly easy to think of her politically. Jade Blue. One of Cinnabar's seconds.

Finally, the stranger. He was a tall man, even taller than Oregon, and much more gaunt; he appeared to have too little skin for the size of his head. His face was stretched too tight over the underlying bone structure. Nose and cheekbones jutted like the blades of knives.

He was dressed in a sweat-stained and travelworn robe. His feet were shod with leather sandals. His appearance was austere; he wore no jewelry or other ornaments. Road-dust lay in a patina on his feet and hands. His eyes were as dark as obsidian chips; they missed nothing.

"I don't believe I know you," said Oregon.

"Cafter. Wythe Cafter," said the stranger.

"Your name isn't familiar to me."

"I am sent by Leah Sand."

Oregon said, "Where is Leah?"

"She is unavoidably detained," said Cafter. "She asks that I join the expedition in her stead. That is, if you have no objection."

"Why didn't she let me know herself?"

"She has adequate reasons for this, yet feels overly self-conscious."

Tourmaline asked, "Why?"

The man grinned sourly. "Compared to joining an expedition to the Apocalypse, wouldn't any competing activity seem a weak excuse indeed?"

"I trust Leah," said Tourmaline. "If she says she can't..."

"I still don't know who you are," said Oregon.

"I dislike talking about myself. Can't you accept my desire for privacy?"

Oregon persisted. "This isn't a holiday outing upon which we're embarking. You're an unknown quantity."

"I am going with you," said the stranger, with finality.

They breakfasted on tea and cakes and fresh fruit. Jade Blue drank an additional cup of cream. Conversation was muted throughout the meal, ranging from Tourmaline who became very valuable about the success of the fructiferous trees in her garden, to Wythe Cafter who said nothing.

Oregon finally set down his cup of tepid tea decisively and waved away Tourmaline's offer of a warmer refill. "It's time," he said. "Torre, what do you see?" The red-haired woman jerked and refocused her eyes on Oregon's "Destruction."

"Ours? The city's?"

She shook her head slowly. "Unspecific. Just... destruction."

"Hardly an auspicious beginning," said Jade Blue. "We're not even on the road."

"It makes no difference," Oregon answered. "All she ever sees is destruction." He sighed and got to his feet. "Shall we be on our way?"

Cafter at last spoke. "You don't know what you're really going to find at City Center."

"I don't even know if we're going to find anything at all, much less whether I'm going to find this small band of friends."

"It's from the center that all things fly apart," said Torre abruptly.

"And that's apparently what things are doing," said Oregon, "flying apart. So we'll try the center."

"Have you been there before?"

"I've several times journeyed toward City Center, but I don't even know if we're the central vortex itself."

"Why not?" said Cafter.

"Something very much like fear," said Oregon. "Awe."

Jade Blue was pacing up and down the length of the dining room. "I'm impatient to be started."

"Then we're off," Oregon hefted a metal staff and started for the door.

"No food?" said Cafter. "No supplies? What sort of

expedition is this?"

"We'll travel to City Center through a succession of klein tubes; it shouldn't take long at all. With any luck, we'll complete an investigation and be back here for supper."

"Do we have to take the tubes?" said Jade Blue. "Kleining makes my belly restless."

"What about Tourmaline's airship?" Torre pointed up through the transparent roof at the tethered blue teardrop-shape of the balloon.

"It's modified to its limit to carry three passengers," Tourmaline said. "Five would be impossible."

"Naturally," Obregon said, "two of us could volunteer to stay here." No one did. "Then discomfort or not, I'm afraid we take the tubes."

The nearest klein terminal was in the giant trunk of an oak in the wood surrounding Tourmaline's home. A soft schime sounded as Tourmaline touched the marbled bole at eye-level and the bark of the trunk rippled and slid aside. Jade Blue grumbled something indecipherable and padded first into the chamber, the others following. They heard the tree chime again and found themselves

standing beneath a crumbling brick arch. A spacious square of sunbaked cobblestones stretched before them. They were surrounded by low buildings, also built of crude brick.

"This is not where we're supposed to be," said Obregon.

Tourmaline took a tentative step out into the bright sunlight. "Where are we?"

"Judging from the architecture, I would guess—" "Hush!" Torre interrupted him. "I hear something approaching..."

They all heard it now; a collective scampering noise like that of migrating mice. "There!" Tourmaline pointed across the square.

The band of fantod spilled into the square from a narrow alleyway. The small, dumpy, purple bipeds detected the intruders immediately. With squeaks of alarm, the band wheeled as one organism and scampered across the far side of the area, seeking shelter through another alley. The expression on the fantods' long-snouted faces seemed to be sad; their long, bat-like ears drooped wearily. Sounds of their flight diminished in the distance.

"That settles it," said Obregon. "Fantod hate salt water and live as far from the sea as possible. I'd guess we're in the western sector of Cinnabar, very close to the rim of the desert."

"That is the wrong way," said Cafer.

Obregon nodded. "We're further from City Center than when we embarked on Tourmaline's home." He stepped back into the shadow of the brick arch. The chime sounded as the others followed suit

and found themselves crowded into a dark corner of what seemed to be a deserted inn. They stared around at the overturned chairs, the heavy hardwood tables, the empty decanters on the bar. They looked up and saw rough-hewn timbers gabling the roof.

"I know this place," said Cafer. "It's the Coronet and it's not the destination we seek."

Obregon said, "Are we any closer to City Center?" "No. The desert is still within minutes' walk; the greenbelt is barely outside."

"Damn it," said Obregon, turning back to face the dark interior of the inn. The omnipresent chime. They all tried to speak at once

and found themselves

grouped beneath a trellised floral arch in the center of a garden party. Their arrival drew a few curious stares, but little other notice. Perhaps a hundred guests mended among the exquisitely sculpted shrubs and manicured lawns.

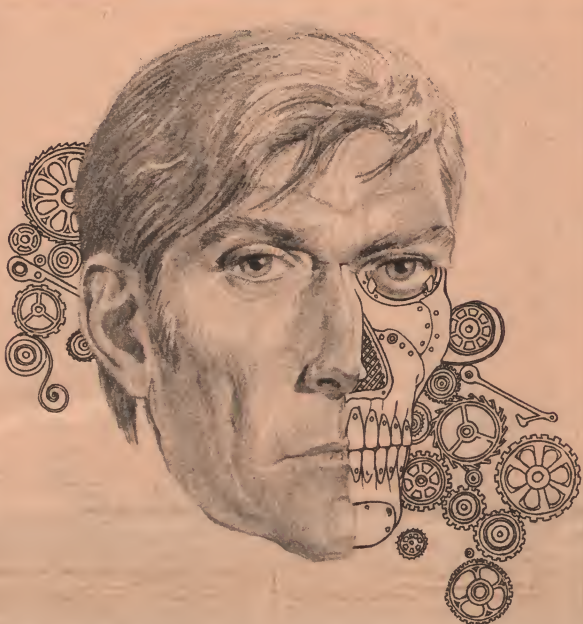
An energetically bubbling steam divided the lawn directly in front of them. Party guests leaned over a bridge railing of scrolled white metal and dropped bits of food to snapping fish. When scraps ran out they were replaced from trays held by resourctronic apes serving as waiters. When Jade Blue saw the servants, a snarling growl rumbled low in her throat.

"This looks familiar enough," said Obregon, "but we're still not where we ought..."

A voice addressed them peremptorily from behind: "Obregon? I do not recall inviting you to this party; nor do I remember asking you—" The voice paused deliberately. "...picturesque friends."

"Hello, Anita," Obregon responded before he turned. "This is Crateride Park, correct?"

The fleshy woman chuckled; her multiple chin shook. "Where else could you invade one of my little soirees? Really, Timmath, this is not at all like you. We have had our differences in the past, but I never thought you were the sort of bore who would violate my privacy." Her words hardened as she stood with arms akimbo, fists seated firmly on green-gowned hips. Obregon's voice took on a slightly placating tone.



**The center of their city was also the center of their world, for it was there that Terminex resided.**

"Our apologies, Anita. This territorial error was utterly inadvertent. We will leave promptly." His companions had not moved from under the trellis. Obregon reached to activate the tube.

"Wait," Anita held up a hand's worth of plump fingers. "You at least owe me the satisfaction of my curiosity."

Obregon lowered his own hand. "What do you want to know? I explained to you that this was all a mistake."

"Tell me," she said, "where you were intending to go."

"Inward to City Center."

Anita's eyes widened. "All that way? The lot of you?" "All of us," said Torre in her strange low voice.

A look of comprehension broke across the other woman's face. "City Center? Timmath, is this the fool's errand with which you've browbeaten us all the past year?"

"I've indulged myself in many fool's errands."

"The thing about the computer," she said impatiently. "Then with triumph: 'I know! You said that Terminex is dysfunctional and no longer able to serve us. You claimed you'd go meddling with Terminex and that the source of the computer was City Center.'"

"What I said," said Obregon, "was not only that, but also that Terminex has informed me it intends to terminate Cinnabar."

Anita snorted with laughter. "The city is virtually the computer's own body. Would it commit—" Her voice dropped. "...suicide?"

"Perhaps," said Tourmaline, "if Terminex were insane."

"How repulsive," said Anita. "A repulsive and silly thought."

"Maybe," said Obregon. "That's why we're going to City Center; to see."

"Then go," Anita waved her hand imperiously. "Fools. Good riddance." She turned and surveyed the garden party still proceeding placidly all around them. "I've only spoken with you because you are marginally less boring than my formal guests."

"Would you care to come with us?" She looked startled for just a moment, before the weariness resettled her features. "No yes no," she almost stuttered. "No."

"You're sure?"

She nodded slowly, then more vehemently. "Go now."

Anita turned from them and started to walk toward the bridge. The five beneath the floral arch heard the chime first, then Anita saying over her shoulder, "Good luck."

and found themselves in a frightening place of utmost emptiness.

"Where—?"

"How—?"

"What—?"

Their words jumbled together and choked.

"This can't be Cinnabar," said Torre. She had the conviction that no one else in the party could hear her.

"Timmath," Tourmaline said, "I can't see you." She groped forward.

Obregon grabbed with his long arms as though trying to corral a litter of inquisitive kittens. "All of you, calm down! We can get back through the tube—" Somehow he backed them all through the invisible gateway. They felt the kleining effect twist and yank at their viscera

and found themselves staggering beside the trunk of the giant oak in the woods outside Tourmaline's home.

Obregon furiously slammed his palm against the rough bark of the terminal. "Damn that thing! It knows!"

Jade Blue said, "Who knows?"



Tormaline said dully, "Terminex."

"I've klined toward City Center before," said Oregon. "Somehow the computer knew that this time my actions concerned it. This manipulation of the kelin tubes has been Terminex's doing."

"It's not going to let us get to City Center," said Tormaline.

Wyffe Cafer looked thoughtful. "I have a suggestion. He looked into their faces. "The ship?"

"The overload..." said Tormaline.

Oregon said, "We'll just have to pick two from among us to stay. The airship will be much slower than tubing, but at least it's a faster means than walking."

"It's my ship," said Tormaline. "Naturally I'll have to go."

"We'll see," said Oregon, smiling.

Kicking up fallen leaves, they walked back through the woods toward the house. "Well? Terminex find anything to throw us?"

"Maybe," Oregon said. "Maybe not. I've noted curious lapses in the computer's mentality. What's a subliminal sign in Terminex's own thought processes might be long enough, objectively, for us to reach City Center."

"And should something like that happen?" said Cafer.

"Terminex has become capricious and unpredictable. It could have finished us with its klining tricks."

"I think we're safe as travelers as staying here as stationary targets," said Jade Blue. The others nodded agreement.

"Then we'll take our chances with the airship," said Oregon.

"What airship?" said Torre, leaving the screening woods and tilting her face up toward the transparent house.

They found what remained of Tormaline's airship upon reaching the roof. It consisted of an inflated sphere tied to the mooring mast, surrounded by scraps of tough blue fabric—all that remained of the gas-bag. Upon close inspection, Oregon found that the sphere was cunningly woven from thin strips of airship material. The amount of warp and weft was supremely intricate. "No doubt," said Oregon, "computer generated."

"What now?" said Tormaline.

Neither Oregon nor anyone else had an answer. Finally, Jade Blue said, "We wait."

"We wait," Oregon confirmed.

"Good," said Cafer. "I'm accustomed to foot-travel."

"There's plenty of fruit in the botanic garden," said Tormaline.

"We'll pack as much as we can carry and eat before it becomes over-ripe," said Oregon. "There should be food and klink available along most of the way."

"How long should it take?" said Torre.

"Four or five weeks," said Cafer.

"Then we had better hurry." The woman had picked up one of the gas-bag scraps which she folded over and folded again until the bundle no longer bent. Her face was tortured; her eyes looked far beyond the edge of the roof. "We haven't very much time."

# DAY 1

Tormaline had never before trudged so far through the forest. She had taken walks among the trees, but always previously there had been the airship for traveling across the entirety of the Twelve-mile Wood. She was accustomed to flying in the warm sunshine, looking down at the crowns of the trees rolling in the wind as a green sea, not hiking through this perpetual forest twilight at ground level.

After the first kilometer or so, the forest became much less park-like and the party had to break their way through snarled thickets of brush. Each person was soon laden with brambly scratches, even Jade Blue with her thick, protective hide. Sweat and bits of bush matted her fur. Still she was the only one of the party keeping the pace with seeming effortlessness.

Jumping with a clumsy hop over a fallen branch, Tormaline caught one boot-shod foot on another tree limb and sprawled headlong. Cafer helped her up.

"Thanks," she said. He acknowledged her with a nod.

"Clearing," said Oregon, ahead. "Well rest." They broke into the open and flopped down on the mossy forest floor, but not all together as a group.

Wyffe Cafer went of a few paces and sat down with his back to a smooth-barked tree of indeterminate species and his face averted from the others.

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She glanced over toward Cafer in his solitary spot and said, "I wonder why he's so strange."

"Because he is asocial? You're sounding like a Crater-side Park catatron."

Tormaline looked uncomfortable. "I was only curious."

The catmrother hesitated and then said, "Maybe it has something to do with his being a simulacrum."

"Tormaline's chin jerked up. "He is? Does Tormaline know?"

"My nose told me. I'm sure Tormaline has his ways of finding these things out."

"A simulacrum..." Tormaline said quizzically. "Why should Leah Sand send this artificial person in her stead?"

"He's related not so distantly from my own kind," said Jade Blue, "and I am here."

This time Tormaline colored. "I'm sorry—I didn't mean to be unkind."

"Forget it," said the catmrother.

Oregon had gotten to his feet and now approached them. "I know this hasn't been a very long rest, but Torre thinks we ought to press on immediately."

"Too late," said Torre from across the clearing.

All of them heard the crash of splintering branches, the sound as though something large were shouldering its way through the forest. "Well better seek cover," said Oregon. The sounds of violent travel neared the clearing.

"Agaun, too late," Torre said.

A coope of white aspen was smashed apart as a bulky creature lurched out of the shadows. It walked upright on two pillar-like legs, dragging a long, leathery tail behind. Two much smaller limbs were folded against its chest, almost in a praying position. The thick neck was topped by a massive head and equally massive jaw. The mouth dropped open, displaying tooth-lined jaws gaping ragged and white. The creature emitted a sinister, serpentine hiss. From a height of at least five meters, a pair of reptilian eyes deeply inset within the huge head surveyed the clearing.

"What is that?" said Jade Blue.

The creature took a tentative, lumbering step toward them. Its hairless skin gleamed with a wet glop from sweat.

"It appears to be a Tyrannosaurus Rex," said Oregon. "They're presumed extinct."

"Fossil or reconstruction," said Cafer, "this monster appears to be aggressive."

The tyrannosaur again hissed as it advanced deliberately across the clearing. Its jaws clashed together like a portcullis falling into place.

"Tinnath," said Tormaline, "do something!"

**They had tried all the normal routes to city center, and found them closed. Now they had to walk, over a highway that seemed determined to kill them.**

# DAY 2

It was a pleasant afternoon, clear-skied and warm, and no one had any physical complaints other than sore muscles from the unaccustomed trekking and some itchy welts left by the blemishes in the Twelve-mile Wood. The five, even Cafer, were in high spirits. Tormaline wanted to remove her protective clothing and discard it along the winding brick road, but Oregon stopped her. "Slow it in the pack if you like, but don't leave. We may still encounter a district every bit as uncomfortable as the park."

Tormaline slipped out of the one-piece garment, pulled off her boots, and then folded the items into a small bundle which she put away in her pack. Naked and comfortable now, she stared around in the surroundings with interest. "What district is this?"

"I'm not positive," said Oregon, "but I believe it is called Cairngorm."

The road ran a circuitous course among clusters of white slab-like buildings. The walls were constructed of plaster and punctuated at irregular intervals by tall, narrow window-slits. No structure had been raised more than ten storeys.

Cairngorm Tower stood dead still in the afternoon heat. "Where are the inhabitants?" said Tormaline.

"I doubt there are any," Oregon said. "The capacity of Cinnabar is so much greater than its actual population. I imagine the people of Cairngorm grew weary of endless millennia ago and simply moved on. They're probably scattered everywhere from Crateride Park to North Beach by now. Others will eventually grow sufficiently bored with their own districts and move here."

"What a meaningless existence," said Cafer. Oregon glanced at him curiously. The simulacrum continued. "There should be a purpose in an endless circuit of trying to avoid death."

"What is your purpose?" said Torre in a neutral voice.

"I don't know." The admission was halting. "I'm looking for one." Now defensive: "At least I'm making the effort."

Jade Blue said, "A purpose? I have my charge."

"The child George?" Cafer said. "I hear you speak of him with Tormaline. But what will you do after he grows up?"

"My position is secure," said the catmrother. "George will never mature."

"All children grow up."

"Not George; his parents have seen to it. They prefer him as a child."

"That is despicable," said Cafer.

No one there found reason to agree; and Jade Blue kept a politic silence. For a while the only sounds were the slap of bare soles, the click of boots, and the soft pad of paws against the brick.

"You," Cafer said to Torre. "What is your purpose?"

"To attain nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Quite literally." She smiled faintly with pale lips.

"Games?" Cafer said angrily. "Do you see why I haven't cared to talk to you?"

Torre's voice was tranquil. "It is no game."

"Please," said Tormaline. "Both of you, don't quarrel; don't be so serious. Consider my purpose—I'm here as a tourist, I want to see parts of Cinnabar I've never before seen."

Cafer cut in. "That's what I mean! Tourists. Dilettantes. You've no real purpose at all. What use have you for anything?" Stung, Tormaline opened her mouth to reply; Cafer rushed on. "No purpose. You and your city might as well not exist."

"Correct," Oregon's voice was tired. "Has anyone forgotten why we're ostensibly making this trek? The others fell silent. "We still have a considerable distance to traverse; we shouldn't travel in rancor."

One of them pointed around a long-fountain whose spout had been the horn of a sculpted unicorn. About a hundred meters beyond sprawled two clusters of the familiar white buildings the road led between them.

"We see greenery between those towers," said Oregon. "We must be reaching the boundary of Cairngorm."

"Not too soon for me," Jade Blue said. "This is a place of thine."

Tormaline pointed and said, "Look! Someone's on

one of those towers." A figure atop one of the buildings was waving a scrap of red fabric. Tormaline yaved back.

Jade Blue wrinkled her nose. "The wind is wrong... but I think there are many more than that one waiting ahead."

As though in response to the wave of the red cloth, the ground levels of each of the buildings by the road expelled a horde of screaming, gesticulating figures. They were apparently human, savage in appearance, carrying spears and clubs. Smoke began to waft aloft from the tops of the buildings, other figures appeared at each parapet.

Jade Blue's lips drew back from her fangs; her claws extended. "They're not friendly," Torre said. The mad from the buildings screamed blood-curdling threats as they charged.

Tormaline said, "Tinnath—"

From the tops of the buildings, the savages fired a rain of flaming arrows down at the travelers on the road.

# DAY 3

The Gilaros District was a placid shire of fields and streams and tidy farms. The inhabitants were equally placid, greeting Oregon and the others when they passed with friendly but distant hello's.

"I can only conclude," said Oregon, "that the good folk of Gilaros are simply not interested in strangers."

Cafer said, almost like an incantation, "Introverted, insular, inbred, stagnant. Where are they going?"

"Nowhere," said Oregon. "But at least they seem to be happy. That puts them one up on, say, Crateride

Park."

"No difference," said Cafer grumpily.

Tourmaline had noticed occasional children, invariably chubby and happy, playing beside the road. She remarked upon their appearance to Jade Blue. "Some are simulacra," said the catmother. "Some aren't. I've noted them all."

"I suppose they remind you of George."

"That's unavoidable," said Jade Blue. "I have no choice in the matter."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"My maternal feeling is a programmed instinct. It's an inner construction for which I can thank Terminus."

"I didn't know that," said Tourmaline. "I'm sorry."

"It's not the worst thing the computer did. Jade Blue's husky voice became bitter. "There is an extra control inside me when my masters choose to use it. My own first litter of kittens lives within my mind—but only there. At any time Terminus picks it, it can kill them, and for me it will be as though they were actually destroyed in life."

"That's as Cafer said about what George's parents have done—despicable."

Jade Blue said as though to herself, "I will find those kittens sometime, somewhere."

"I believe you will."

They both started from their respective reveries when Oregon called. "Look in the sky!"

"That's beautiful," said Torre. The bird was fully as large as Cafer, its red and golden plumage sparkled in the sun as it flew overhead, east to west, with long, lazy strokes.

"It's a phoenix," said Oregon. "You don't see many of them anymore."

They watched in awe as the phoenix flapped west, toward the desert. Torre said, "You also don't often see an air creature flying directly out in a straight course from City Center."

"Why not?" Cafer said.

"Most don't care for the disorientation brought on by rapid crossing of more than a few time belts. It's much more soothing to ride the air currents out in a widening gyre."

The image of the phoenix diminished in size with distance. "Its wings do seem to be moving more slowly," said Cafer.

"That's only one of our subjective viewpoint. It's the same phenomenon that would make Anita and the others in Craterside Park think we'd have been gone only a short while, regardless of whether we'd spent several subjective years at City Center."

The wings of the distant phoenix moved with an apparent motion almost imperceptible to the eye. The bird looked like a bright insect trapped in amber.

"Let's go," said Oregon.

But Gilganas afforded the tempting opportunity to stop and rest and eat a meal on the banks of a clear, cold stream. There were apples to be had from the overhanging trees. Tourmaline and Cafer supplemented the fruit with cheese and bread from their packs. They all discovered their appetites were ravenous.

After they had eaten, Tourmaline said, "How much further?"

"I still don't know," said Oregon. "I've never traveled this far in Cinnabar on a linear course."

"Well," said Tourmaline, "then we had better be started again."

The road took them through another small wood, across yet another stream, and then ended abruptly. Oregon peered over the lip of the chasm; he could not see the bottom. He looked to the sides and saw that the abyss had no apparent limit in either direction. Directly ahead, the other side of the chasm was perhaps ten meters distant. "This is impossible," he said. "There is no geologic feature like this in Cinnabar."

"How do we get across?" said Tourmaline.

DAY X

The jade gate reared before them. Beyond the arch of green polished stone lay a buffer strip of unkempt lawn. Beyond that was a solitary building. Not nearly so large or impressive as many of the structures the travelers had encountered elsewhere in Cinnabar, the building was round. The ground level served as a sort of plinth, from that rose a featureless, hemispheric dome. Dome and base were both constructed of burnished gray metal; though the dome alone seemed continually highlighted by half-glimpes, shifting flows. They reminded Tourmaline of watching oils winding slowly through sunlight waves.

"At last," said Oregon, excitement in his voice. "This is City Center."

"I had expected it to be more imposing," said Cafer. Torre said, "What we're looking for will be even smaller than this building."

Jade Blue's ears twitched nervously. She said, "The very air here seems charged."

"It is indeed," said Oregon. "Here is the center of

the vortex where all time spirals down into the common center." He stepped under the jade gate and spread his arms. "Whole millennia are crashing down around us like a maelstrom and to us it's all invisible." Tourmaline joined him at the edge of the grass. "It's hard to comprehend."

"We're so very close," said Torre. "Now is not the time to delay."

But Oregon was already halfway across the strip of lawn. The others caught up; together the five climbed the low flight to an arched, open entrance. The interior of the ground level was empty and echoing. Another flight of steps led up evidently to the interior of the dome.

This close to their goal, whatever it might be, they hesitated at the foot of the stairs. "Well," said Oregon, and took the first step up.

They emerged into the dome and stopped, shocked. "What is it?" Cafer said. He stared across the brightly lit room.

In the precise center of the chamber, suspended above the metal floor, something was not.

"Tell me," said Oregon. "What do you see?"

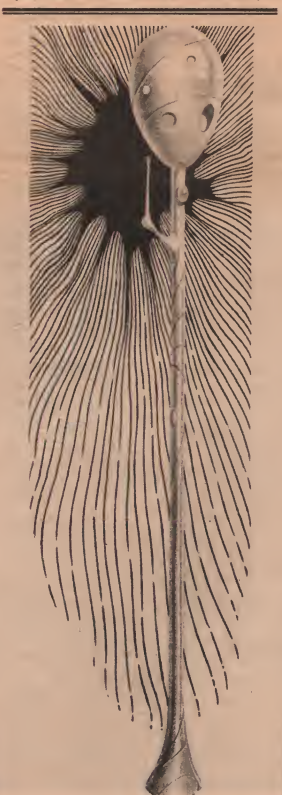
"It's black," said Tourmaline. "At least I think it's black. . . I keep feeling I'm looking at it out of the corner of my eye."

Torre said, "It's like having a wound on my retina. That thing is an absence rather than a presence."

"I cannot tell how large it is," said Cafer.

"It is a hole," said Jade Blue, "that eats all light." "It's frightening," Tourmaline added.

Oregon took a tentative step forward. "Take care," said a voice to his right. "If you inadvertently stray beyond the event horizon, not even I can retrieve you."



The anomaly is insatiable."

Oregon started. "Terminus?"

"At your service."

The anomaly had held their complete attention. None had seen the other occupant of the chamber: an oval about the size of Oregon's head, shining with the same oily rainbow colors as the outside of the building. The egg-shaped was poised on a thin metal column several meters above the floor.

"I'd uh, expected something a bit larger," said Oregon.

"Another generation," said the oval, "and I would be somewhat smaller than the head of your thumb."

"Remarkable," said the scientist.

"Well," Terminus said. "Will you stand there gawking like tourists? Did you not come here with a mission? It has been a considerable while since an inhabitant of Cinnabar stood in this chamber."

"The journey is arduous," said Cafer.

"How well I know," Almayne said. "It is as difficult for me to devise tests as it is for you to meet them."

"You?" said Oregon. "All of that was your doing?"

"Yes," said Terminus. "The tyrannosaur, the chasm, the barbarian horde, all the rest; touchstones for testing your imagination and ingenuity in stress situations. Should champions of a doomed city not be required to scale certain heights?"

"We met all your obstacles," said Oregon. "Do we then, as you put it, measure as champions?"

"Ordinarily, yes," said the computer. "But now, no."

"That's not fair," said Tourmaline angrily.

"Too late," said the computer. "There is no justice." And then Terminus chuckled.

The five were stunned; the computer had always been a reassuring constant. Almayne! For so long that something as uncharacteristic as a computer's chuckle seemed incomprehensible, Terminus's chuckle turned into a bubbling, horrifying laugh that ended when the computer said, "I am intermittently but utterly mad."

"How has this happened?" said Oregon.

"Cumulative dysfunction—shall I explain? Over the millennia I have become increasingly complex. It has been necessary to divide my structure over the entirety of Cinnabar, else the city functions could not be coordinated. My proliferated complexity has caused grievous problems attempting synchronicity in a city covered by a time vortex and with the accompanying dilation effects. Is it any wonder that my substructure has begun to fall under the strain?"

"And so you fancy yourself insane."

"Not insane, Oregon. Mad as a mufly." Again the computer chuckled.

"The tests," said Oregon. "We passed your tests."

"I don't think so, Timnath. Torre's face and voice were sick."

"True," said Terminus. "No longer being rational, I feel no constraint not to change my mind."

"So what are you going to do now?"

"Timnath . . ." Torre said, her eyes squeezed shut. "I see towers toppling . . . Cinnabar burning."

"The tests will continue," said Terminus. "Each of you took it upon himself or herself to come this far. I suppose the least I can do is to be a congenial destroyer."

"It's hopeless," said Jade Blue.

"Not so, catmother. If there be one among you I deem worth saving, then perhaps I will spare the city."

"Perhaps?" said Oregon. "That's less than a guarantee."

"It is all you get."

Oregon spread his hands helplessly. "Then we have no choice. How shall this be done?"

"I shall examine you individually," said Terminus. "Should you not measure up to my criteria . . ."

"What are those criteria?" said Cafer.

"I choose not to divulge them." It paused, then said, "Should any of you measure favorably, you will have an opportunity to rid Cinnabar of my dysfunctional presence forever."

"How?" said Oregon.

"I was getting to that," said the computer. "Consider the anomaly in the center of the chamber. Reluctantly they all turned to stare at the shimmering black sphere. "What you see is the innermost point of the time vortex over Cinnabar. Yet this is not in itself the final destination of the time flow; the anomaly is both hole and tunnel, exiting somewhere and somewhere else. Presumably in another universe there is an equivalent white hole admitting the great influx of time from our world."

"This is fascinating," said Oregon, "but—"

"Hush," said the computer. "I am reaching the conclusion. My point is that the journey between this black hole and the white is one-way and irreversible. I am what you might term the heart and brain of Terminus. If I allow one of you to hurl me beyond the event horizon of the anomaly, I will vanish from this universe."



*Norman Spinrad, the man who put aside his own personality to write a science fiction by "by Adolph Hitler," explains why he thinks science fiction must become the most powerful literary form in existence.*

interviewer/Arthur Cover

# VERTEX INTERVIEWS NORMAN SPINRAD

VERTEX: Since you're an ambitious writer in terms of what you try to accomplish, why did you choose speculative fiction as your medium?  
SPINRAD: In strictly literary terms—setting aside all the economic and practical considerations—sf is the freest kind of fiction. You can say anything you want; you can do anything you want; you can invent anything you want. Sf is a realistic rendering of the unreal. I guess that is what attracted me to the form, except that it's not a form, it's not a mode. I don't know what it is.

VERTEX: A genre?  
SPINRAD: Not a genre. I'm talking about the literary essence of it. It can be any form, any style, any content. As a reader, sf interested me because I would pick up a book and I wouldn't know what it was going to read. Sometimes it was a lot of junk. But it was a lot of junk being read by a twelve-year-old kid. And to a twelve-year-old kid, that junk was great. In terms of influence on me at the time, it was incredible, mind-blowing stuff. When I started writing, it was natural for me to start writing science fiction.

VERTEX: Do you think that the sf genre or form is a worthy one, or is it on a par with nurse novels?

SPINRAD: Well, I make a big distinction between the genre and the form. Sf is the most powerful literary form in existence; up until the 19th century it was the dominant form of literary expression. People didn't have this notion of fixed reality. Then in the 19th century a post-Age-of-Reason rationality came in and the Victorians became convinced that the universe was a tinkertoys construct and that they had everything figured out. Everything had to be realistic; fantasy was rubbish. But that was a digression from the mainstream of human art. I think.

Now the genre is something else. The genre was invented by Hugo Gernsback in 1926—pulp magazines, space opera, and all that. I think a great deal of the genre is crap. I would like the genre to die so that the writers using the form would not be restricted by the commercialization, the censorship, and all the other things that make up a genre. That way the form would flourish.

VERTEX: Can you tell me a few examples of how the genre restricts the form of sf?

SPINRAD: A lot of editors talk about balanced lists, and what they're talking about is balancing fiction of quality with garbage. Editors who know better are nevertheless publishing bad stuff because it is commercially more viable. The whole attitude of publishers has become very, very schlocky. An important novel by an important writer whom I certainly won't embarrass by mentioning had been told by the printing department of a hardcover house that he had to cut thirty pages of his book to meet their format. They didn't care which thirty pages, just that thirty pages had to go from somewhere. That shows in a nutshell the attitude of some of these houses toward science fiction: it's cheese to be sold like cheese.

VERTEX: You've covered editors and publishers pretty well. What about writers?

SPINRAD: I know you're from Clarion. I have ambivalent feelings about those sf writing workshops. Only, from afar, because I've never been involved in Clarion. But I have the notion that what the students from Clarion are encouraged to do is to mistake quality for quantity. The students measure their worth by how much stuff they have in print. And, well, I've heard stories from Clarion students that people there were having them write a story a day or something like that.



VERTEX: Harlan Ellison had us try to do that, mainly as an exercise to see how we worked under pressure.

SPINRAD: The idea that you should write a story a day is hideous; it's like trying to train another generation of pulp writers. And that's another thing which is going on in science fiction! Publishers are looking for people who can turn out pulp stuff! One editor said, "I'm looking for hungry young writers who can do six books a year." Nobody's going to do six good books a year! What I'm really concerned about is the younger half-generation of writers after me being partially led, partially forced, partially stumbling into a retrogressive direction toward fitting in with the genre norms and genre conventions. I don't know.

VERTEX: You can tell me how true you think that is.

VERTEX: Most of the young writers I'm familiar with have very high literary ambitions, but they don't . . .

SPINRAD: They don't work at them.

VERTEX: They work at them; they don't succeed. Most of them are too young. In other words, they sell a lot of stuff before they have had the practice and experience to accomplish what they set out to do.

SPINRAD: The question is: What are they writing? What are they selling? I tried writing ambitious stuff in the beginning and instead of doing little things that were pretty perfect, I started doing big things that were pretty imperfect. Then I started getting better. So I don't put that down. It's hard for young writers to find a place where they can learn. And in novels it's even more difficult! It's very hard to sell an unconventional novel now. It's more like 1963 than like it was in 1967 or '68.

VERTEX: What have you tried to do about the deplorable condition of the sci-fi since you became vice-president of the Science Fiction Writers of America?

SPINRAD: Since I've been Veep of SFWA, I can't pretend things have gotten better; they've gotten worse. But Jerry Pournelle, the president, and I have moved SFWA more in the direction of trying to act as a force for improving the field. We're getting the Nebula books much more seriously treated; we're getting more of a liaison with academic interests. In terms of the really hard-core things, like having science fiction published seriously, we haven't gotten very far. Not when a hardcover publisher tells a very important writer he has to cut thirty pages out of a book because it doesn't fit his printer's format.



VERTEX: Speaking of Nebulas, you've never made any bones about the fact that you want to win a Nebula or receive formal recognition for your work. How come?

SPINRAD: I haven't said that in a while, I don't think.

VERTEX: Well, you used to say it. Why did you used to say it?

SPINRAD: First of all, I think I was certain words of mine for which I thought I deserved a Nebula. And I still feel that two or three of them that I wrote deserved it because they were

the best in their category by a wide margin that year. And to be perfectly honest, the Nebula is worth money when you're negotiating book contracts. Now, in my vast maturity, I've come to the point of view that these awards don't mean anything except money. And Nebulas make nice bookends; they're much nicer looking than Hugos.

VERTEX: I've heard a story about one writer in particular who got up in front of a group of sympathetic people and said, "I deserve this award because of all the years I've been in the field."

What is your opinion of people who campaign for Nebulas?

SPINRAD: We know a lot of people who've made great mileage out of having them on their book jackets and doing all kinds of contortions for them. I've never campaigned for a Nebula. In fact, the year I had two things on the ballot, I was out of the country.

Again, a Nebula means bread; if a writer wants it to make some bread, that's all right. I suppose I think it's a weird for some people to get a psychological lift for being recognized after they've campaigned. If I did that,

I don't think I would be able to delude myself that I won on my merits.

VERTEX: How good do you think your science fiction really is?

SPINRAD: Pretty damned good. There are only a handful of writers in the sci field who are doing work on my level, and maybe one or two who are better. Of course, it depends on what you're talking about. I've written some horrid stuff. There's a book called *Agent of Chaos* which I wrote in six weeks and hated when I finished it. But apparently the philosophical content struck a lot of people. I guess a lot of science fiction is like that: lousy literature but with an idea which makes it transcend its crappiness.

VERTEX: Your novels appear to have been written by a man who is calling attention to himself. Do you think that's a fair statement?

SPINRAD: I'm not sure what that means.

VERTEX: You seem to have the attitude that the reader must notice your books because they do things which are different, more violent, more hysterical. They move at such a rapid pace.

SPINRAD: You can judge whether or not I'm calling attention to myself, but



*"There are only a handful of writers in the sci field who are doing work on my level, and maybe two or three who are better. Of course, it depends on what you're talking about. I've written some horrid stuff."*

I think what you're talking about, really, is what McLuhan calls the difference between hot and cool. I read *Understanding Media* while I was writing *Bug Jack Barron* because I was having problems conveying in print the effect of watching television. So I wrote that in a very kinetic style.

Afterwards I liked doing fast stuff more than writing cooler prose. *Bug Jack Barron* was also influenced by music in a kind of way; the thing was postulated so you would read it in different rhythms. In other words, when I write a book, I ask myself, "What will be the effect in the reader's head?" Not "What will the words look like on paper?"

VERTEX: I believe that violence is a definite characteristic of your work.

SPINRAD: Ah, this word violence: I'm not sure what it means anymore. In *Bug Jack Barron* there are exactly two violent acts; one of them is the attempted assassination of Barron and the other in Howard Benedict's office where they drag him off.

VERTEX: Not physical violence, but emotional or intellectual violence.

SPINRAD: It makes "violence" meaningless to me to equate that with something like *The Men in the Jungle*. It may have to do with energy rather than violence. A lot of my work deals with high energy states: people whose minds move very fast, events happen to them fast, they react fast. In my sentences two or three things happen: events come fast, images come fast, everything comes fast. And I've noticed that when I'm describing something that happens, I'm really into the bodies of the people involved. I'm describing the states of their internal organs. In that sense it's all very physical. Maybe that's why you would equate it with violence. But it's really somatic.

VERTEX: Well, perhaps I'm looking at it narrowly, but that was always the impression I got from reading your stuff. Because there was always something very weird going on.

SPINRAD: Science fiction is the art of the very weird. I suppose.

VERTEX: I suppose. What intellectual forces have shaped you so that your works are so passionate and move so fast?

SPINRAD: The whole question of density—I think density is a good word! Density is what gives the impression of speed. Well, anyway, there was a time when I was having difficulty writing action sequences. So I asked myself, "Who writes action sequences the best?" And the answer was Keith Laumer. I started looking at his sentences. "He threw a right, ducked, dodged, slithered under here, rolled over, and came up on his feet." That's how *Bug Jack Barron* was written. Very kinetic prose. Then I said, "What Laumer is really doing, on a more general level, is density of images." So why not do everything that way?

That's how *Bug Jack Barron* was written. It was a more exciting way to write, so my imagery got denser and denser. I guess the ideal prose style is poetry, if you can get it down that far.

VERTEX: I know that films have influenced you. Any particular films?

SPINRAD: Not films so much as the idea of film. Recently I've written a 900 page book, *Passing Through the*



Flame, and the end of it is really a lot of cuts. Everything is a scene, everything is a shot. The syntax of the novel isn't the conventional novel syntax; it's film syntax. You don't have to make transitions anymore. When they make a cut in commercials, you know what has happened. So there are no transitions in my work. And no exposition, if I can help it. Everything is from the viewpoint of the character. You're in there; I'm not the author standing around telling you everything anymore than I can help it. I'm trying to do a movie on paper. I've also done multiple viewpoints and styles in the same story. "The Big Flash" has five or six viewpoints, and why not?

VERTEX: Didn't A.J. Budry once complain that you don't write in a consistent style?

SPINRAD: I took that as a compliment; I don't understand it as a complaint. I think the style should be the style of what's going on, not the style that you're imposing. A big reason why science fiction writers don't mature is that they confuse style with stylization. You choose a style to render a certain effect so you can make a particular point. If I wrote everything like *Bug Jack Barron*, my work would become mannered very quickly. Just like Bradbury's stuff and Zelazny and Lafferty. That's why Lafferty is such a great short story writer and not such a good novelist. In science fiction the editorial and critical atmosphere tends to encourage writers to adopt a certain style. Oh yes. It happened to Delany too.

VERTEX: Or to Jack Vance?

SPINRAD: Well, I kind of grant an exception to Vance, because it's so good. I don't get bored reading his stuff. I could read it forever. And it depends on how flexible that stylized prose is, how much it can do. Vance's style can do so much because it is sardonic. Phil Dick writes in the same style all the time, but his style has a lot of range.

VERTEX: Speaking of style, what the role of the style you used in *The Iron Dream*?

SPINRAD: I tried to write that in the style Hitler would have written it in. If you've ever listened to Hitler's speeches, you know that he got more and more psychotic as he went along. Hitler's Germany started out as this Wagnerian sword-and-sorcery thing and by the end of World War II it was superweapons and SS guys and that kind of scientific super stentility. So the book made that same sort of progression, from a sword-and-sorcery novel into van Vogtian kind of stuff.

Van Vogt and Hitler both were influenced by Nietzsche. I don't think it was an accident that space opera was invented at the same time Hitler was taking over Germany. Anyway, the book was my attempt to write a psychotic novel.

VERTEX: Do you think you succeeded? SPINRAD: I don't know. There's a kind of parody in writing a book like that, because Hitler was a lousy painter too. For the book to be good, it had to be really bad.

VERTEX: One aspect about *The Iron Dream*, which impresses me is the detail which fleshes out the basic idea behind the book. Did you find yourself personally identifying with the protagonists?

SPINRAD: No, no, no, not at all. The basic research was reading *Mein Kampf* all the way through, and let me tell you, it was a horrifying experience. And then there was an 800 page book of dinner conversations. Bormann used to take down everything Hitler said in shorthand. It enabled me to get into his mind.

VERTEX: What kind of conclusions about Hitler's character did you reach?

SPINRAD: Well, the political philosophy was really half-baked crap; the economic philosophy didn't make any sense; and in all his films, Hitler looks like a clown. And yet this guy had 80 million people utterly mesmerized. I finally came to the conclusion that he had an inner certainty that he was always right, could not possibly be wrong, that he always knew where he stood at any moment. He was able to project this. Even at the end of the war all these plots were swirling around and everybody was trying to double-cross everybody else; but they were still all trying to gain favor with the Führer. The certainty that this guy put out was so total that they didn't even think of getting rid of him, even at the end, when everything was falling apart.

VERTEX: And you tried to portray that inner certainty in the book?

SPINRAD: Yeah. There's this guy Hitler writing about Eric Jagger—a name, by the way, which would make agonizing to come up with, which seemed obvious once I had it. It was his wish fulfillment fantasy of himself, as the tall blond Aryan he wasn't. Again, with all that inner certainty about these horrible things, I remember his justification of the concentration camps, making them seem like a normal thing. And I know that. Hike had that same feeling. I about every fucking thing he did. I

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Taking a look at the latest offerings from the S-F movie moguls.

# Screen Game

by EDWARD BRYANT

## MY LIVING DOLL IN SUBURBIA

*The Stepford Wives*, starring Katharine Ross, Paula Prentiss, Tina Louise, and Patrick O'Neal. Directed by Bryan Forbes. Written by William Goldman, from the novel by Ira Levin. Rated PG.

Some of the newsmen are billing *The Stepford Wives* as "a sinister, anti-feminist picture." Sinister, yes. But the other part is as accurate as calling *The Day After Frank* an anti-Semitic tract. Once again the most simplistic of speculative fiction is boggling the reviewers. One hopes the audience has more sense.

I'll have to admit I was completely (and unfairly) prepared to dislike *Wives*. Here, after all, was yet another big-time, best-selling mainstream author (Rosemary's Baby, *This Perfect Day*) getting down to stick his snout in the trough of popular SF. Having recently read *A Kiss Before Dying*, Levin's first published novel—and having been thoroughly impressed by it—maybe I should have known better.

William Goldman's script adaptation of *Wives* is slick and entertaining; it slides down the viewer's throat like belladonna and honey. Part smooth thriller, part blatant satire, the film is not without its socially redeeming message—but more about that later.

Stepford Village is everybody's parody of a suburban refuge for prosperous New York City commuters. It is a plastic Disney World of Grand Union supermarkets, dall summer lawn parties and the ominous old mansion belonging to the Stepford Men's Association. It is also a haven of sunshine and unsmogged air for Walter (Peter Masterson) and Joanna (Katharine Ross), lately arrived with their two children from the heart of Manhattan.

It doesn't take long for none-too-subtly posed questions to break the grotesque idyll of Stepford. Why does Walter, strangely, already seem to be acquainted with his new neighbors? Why does the camera dwell lovingly on the signs of local industries lining the freeway to Stepford—names like CompTech and Cobs Biochemical Associates? And most importantly, why are the wives of Stepford's most prominent citizens seemingly identically programmed to look and behave like the most stringent card-carrying members of Fascinating Womanhood?

There are legitimately planted clues, yet those clues are painted in neon. It should be the rare viewer who won't beat Katharine Ross to the Answer by about two reels. At the same time, I was caught up by the mingled horror and satire as Joanna encounters her fellow wives. The wives of Stepford come close to duplicating Richard Boone's infamous ideal of "a deaf mute who owns a liquor store." Always perfectly groomed and lovely, contently smiling and sexually receptive, they love to bake cookies and do the kitchen floor. They also tend to speak in lines taken verbatim from Easy-On Spray Starch commercials.

An in-process liberated woman (she's a dilettante photographer with ambitions), Joanna naturally is taken aback. She makes contact with Bobby (Paula Prentiss) and Charmaine (Tina Louise), two other recently-arrived wives. The trio tries to form a women's group. Their efforts are not only frustrated but rebuffed.

At yet one of the really nice things about the film emerges from these sequences: we see one-to-one friendships developing among the three women. This is something just not that often depicted in the current run of Redford/Newman/McQueen-dominated Hollywood films.

But it's a transitory triumph. Charmaine abruptly alters with no explanation from tennis-playing independent woman to another of the die-cut Stepford brownie-bakers. And then the mysterious change, whatever it is, falls upon Bobby. . . And Joanna is left alone without allies, very much in the same paranoiac position as Warren Beatty in *The Parallax View*. Now it's Joanna's turn. . .

I'll refrain from running through the ending just in case there's one among you yet to see the film who might be surprised by the plot. So I definitely won't tell you that the key to the whole conspiracy is Nixonian. Nor Ziegler ought to be a clue.

It is in the tradition of good science fiction that the film is both diverting and political. I expect the reason some viewers see *Wives* as anti-feminist is because of the constant barrage of references to the women of the community as "every man's dream of the 'perfect' wife." But then I also suspect that some viewers take things entirely too seriously here; at least the wrong things. The film is a bleak, black swipe at men whose ever-widened "his" woman would leave her job and return to the hearth, she would cancel her subscription to *Ms.*, and that the ERA would meet a quicker doom than the Volstead Act. I think this movie will make quite a few male viewers uncomfortable; the satire is laughable, yes, but there are too many embedded grains of truth about the acculturated sexist reactions that lie close to the surface of most, if not all of us.

On the other hand, if *The Stepford Wives* is taken literally, a sort of obverse sexism manifests itself. Is it really fair to postulate that a large group of presumably intelligent, talented, mature, and loving males would, without exception, commit a monstrous—and fatal—act against the women they have loved?

Now that is a truly chauvinist fantasy. One hopes.

## ONE WAS LESS DISASTROUS THAN THE OTHERS

*Earthquake*, starring Charlton Heston, Ava Gardner, George Kennedy, and a doldrum of other stars. Written by George Fox and Mario Puzo. Directed by Mark Robson. Rated PG.

*Airport 1975*, starring Karen Black, Charlton Heston, George Kennedy, and a dullness of others. Written by Don Ingalls. Directed by Jack Smight. Rated PG.

*The Towering Inferno*, starring Paul Newman, Steve McQueen, Faye Dunaway, etc. Written by Stirling Silliphant. Directed by John Guillermin. Rated PG.

For probably a deservedly brief time, disaster films are one of the 'in' phenomena in filmdom. "Thinking the unthinkable" is the guiding credo. Oh, jeez, what would happen if the world's tallest building caught fire? A major earthquake should devastate Los Angeles? An airborne 747 should have its flight crew wiped out? My own idea for a disaster plot was having a fully loaded Jumbo Jet commandeered by a madman threatening to crash the plane into the nerve gas storage facility at the Rocky Mountain Arsenal. It went nowhere.

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Rodger MacGowan

*The planet was theirs to take, if only they could understand, then cope with, the strange life form that seemed to be bent on their total destruction.*

# LANDING PARTY

fiction / **WILLIAM ROTSLER**  
artist / **RODGER MACGOWAN**



Jarl climbed into his cryogenic coffin and sat down. He didn't lie back right away, but sat upright watching those who were still milling about, shaking hands, calling out lewd and improbable statements to each other, laughing too loud, trying not to show their fear. The tough young man was also afraid, but as sergeant he was trying not to show any emotion but a calm certainty. So he listened to the others with a little smile on his face.

"I need a good long sleep. That last week on Earth was pretty wild, you should excuse the expression."

"You won't need as much power, Lizi. You were always a cold fish, anyway!"

"Hey, Erin. Why don't you and Jarl get a double vault?"

Jarl looked across at Jarl and smiled. She sat up with one elbow on the edge of the big white cryogenic coffin, wearing her inert-fabric jumper, watching everyone with bright and excited eyes.

"Because he snores, that's why," she called back to Clifford, whose grin was broad and white. The big negro waved at them both and hopped up into the massive coffin. He didn't lie down, or even sit, but stood, his dark head next to the pipes that criss-crossed the ceiling of the room.

"Well, everyone, I just want you to know it was great working with you and as much as I'd like to be out there with you the duties of command keep me back here. But we'll be thinking of you every minute, every motherless minute of the two hundred and twenty years it is going to take you to get to Tau Ceti." Several of the people around him roared, theatrically and Tiara, passing in the aisle, reached up and clipped him behind the knees. He fell to his knees in the cryogenic box, laughing. "We'll take turns thinking about you. It'll become a family thing, passed down from generation to generation..."

"All right, knock it off," came the rough voice of Sergeant Wilde. "Get down and link up. They want to check everything and get you zongos frozen solid before we warp out of orbit."

Clifford grinned at Jarl and Erin then slipped athletically over to lie in the vault. The noise level dropped and the white-clad men and women settled down in their cryogenic "tubs" and left the aisle free for the green-smocked attendants to go about their duties of linking up each person to the life support systems.

"Hey, Jarl," Clifford said, "once our pay on during all this? We should have a bundle by the time we wake up."

"No paymaster on Tau Ceti, Sergeant Clifford," Jarl said. "And no money."

"Goddamn," Clifford said solemnly. "And I was thinking of getting me one of those Jetstars. Just the thing to run out to Mars for a Sunday brunch." Several people chuckled, as Mars was still a one month trip at the shortest, and Jetstars were seldom used even on the Earth-Luna run.

Sergeant Wilde stepped up into his vault and Jarl, who was still propped up on his elbows, thought he looked tough even in the white jumper. "This is the time to say no go," Wilde said. "Once those lids close you are on the biggest one way trip in history." He paused, as if waiting for someone to change his or her mind, although he was certain no one would back out. He looked them over and they stared back. Some were smiling and some looked serious. None looked really scared.

Wilde grinned and said, "Okay." He looked around and his rough face softened into one of his wicked smiles. "Pioneers, huh? Explorers of the stars." He snorted and several of those around him smiled. They had been through the roughest week of their lives, and they knew it well. Each of them was a veteran and victim of the "Kippap Korps." They thought they had been taken from their desperate lives as petty crooks, whores, hustlers, con artists, and youthful thieves and sent by sleeper ship to a distant world. They had believed they were eight or nine hundred years from home and had to learn to survive. They were the survivors, the veterans of later training, and now they were on the way out. They had learned pride and discipline and, in the closeness of the training, they had learned who they were. Jarl, Erin, Tiara, Blaine, and Clifford had thought they were on an alien world of intelligent dinosaurs. They, and others like them, had earned their places on the sleeper ship on a simulated desert world with carnivorous sandworms, on a jungle world with huge snakes and vampire bats, on an ice world, and in a very alien undersea world. The expensive training areas were secret, staffed with the toughest cadre, and populated with animatronic robots shaped like dinosaurs and kraken, piloted by humans, or artificially altered Terman life.

They had toughened and now looked down upon the swarms of people that overpopulated the Earth. They had grown up in a world where they knew that contained everything needed for a half-million to a million people. Some had fought in the vicious, sadistic

**The figures they saw before them were either actual beings from Earths' far past, or images taken from their minds—and in either case the figures spelled extreme danger to them.**



Arenas, where man fought robot, where women fought men, and where few survived long enough to enjoy the luxurious life of the modern gladiator.

But now they were going out into the unknown. They were the first cryogenic ship, the *Rip Van Winkle*, headed for Tau Ceti, a G8 star 118 light years away. The *Lazarus* would ship out in two months towards 82 Erdani, a G5 sun some 20.2 light years distant. Within a year the *Morpheus* would head towards Gliese 75, a K0 sun 28.6 light years away. Each ship had several alternative targets should these stars—which were roughly in the same spectrum range as Sol—not have suitable planets. In the direction the *Rip Van Winkle* was headed the next star of the proper type was Phi 2 Ceti, another forty light years further on. If that, too, without planets they could exist on they'd climb back into the cold tanks and take another jump. The lists were extensive.

Although the first ship and with the closest target, the *Rip Van Winkle* had fewer alternative choices within reasonable range than had the other ships. Their secondary star targets were much closer and there were more of them. The passengers of the *Rip* also knew that if Tau Ceti did have at least one suitable planet they would be dead and buried and their great-grandchildren dead before the other ships even arrived at their destinations.

"All right, heroes and heroines," Wilde said. "Bottle up." The thirty-six men and women lay back. Sergeant Wilde stood watching until everyone was linked up. Then he lay down.

A young woman attendant looked at Jarl, at Jarl, and said, "Good luck." Jarl tried to speak but the anesthetic was already working. In a mist he saw her reach for the lid, then the light dimmed and everything

sort of went away. He didn't feel cold. In fact, he felt nothing, not even the sensation of floating. A tiny ball of panic grew within him, but he forced it back with will. He was only vaguely self-aware and odd shadows drifted across his mind. He tried to make sense out of the shadows and the light, but he couldn't give a name to them. He legged the feel cold and a terrible sort of pain, like a million pinpricks. *They said it wouldn't hurt*, he thought, and was startled by the fact that he had made a coherent thought. The cold was deep and numbing; but before the pain grew larger something flooded into his body and the pain subsided. He lay in a pool of vagueness for a long time, knowing there was pain in his body, but far away and meaningless, like a story told to him of pain. It felt good to float. It was a new sensation. He felt it might be good to spend the time to Tau Ceti just floating.

Tau Ceti.

The *Rip Van Winkle*.

Erin, Wilde, Clifford. All of them going to Tau Ceti. Light began to grow on the other side of his eyelids and it lanced straight into his brain. *Light. Pain.* Make it stop.

But it didn't stop. Slowly, very, very slowly, it grew brighter. It took an eternity of pain but the light still grew brighter until it no longer hurt too much. Jarl wanted to open his eyes and tried, and met the ball of hard panic in his gut grow again when he found he couldn't.

It was an effort of will beyond anything he had known just to open his eyes.

The transparent cover of the cryogenic vault was out-of-focus and misty and he lay for another eternity just looking at it. The vague lines beyond it focused into pipes running along the ceiling. The ceiling of the cryogenic chamber. On the *Rip Van Winkle*. Erin was here, and Wilde.

He was awake. Dimly, he remembered his promise to himself not to ask, when he awoke, "Where am I?" He knew he'd know when they looked out the viewport.

He fell into sleep. There was no hurry, no nap would feel good after a two hundred and twenty year sleep.

It took several days before even the strongest of them could rise from the coffins. Drugs, the painful manipulations by the exercise waldos, the gradual transition from corpses to live human beings, all took time. No one was in a hurry. There were no emergencies. There was plenty of time. Their bodies were too weak and hurt too much to do more than suffer through the exercises and feel the nutrients flow into their blood through the tubes. Even after the lids popped open there was little talk, only soaked calls to see if everyone had made it.

One had not. A girl named Bech, who Jarl did not know well, had a malfunction in her life support system. There was very little left of her after two hundred years, but the bacteria in her body had survived, fed by the life support system. They took one look through the lid, which had not opened automatically, and sealed it permanently shut.

Sergeant Wilde was the first to rise from the cryogenic vaults and Jarl was shaken by the emaciated look of the man. But he felt of his own face with his hands and decided he was no better. Wilde went from cabinet to cabinet, peering down at his company of "volunteers," examining them.

Jarl eventually crept from his coffin, after plucking the various needles from his body and sensor plates from his temples and from over his heart. He staggered across to Erin and was shocked at her appearance. The tone of her skin was healthy, but she was dreadfully skinny, and too weak to rise from the cryogenic bed by herself.

One by one the various members rose from his or her box and made their way to the mess hall, to collapse at the tables. Wilde and Clifford, who seemed stronger than most of them, distributed containers of nutrient that had been defrosted when the tubs began opening. They sipped from the tubes and made painful faces as they used their throat muscles swallowed. Several, including Erin, vomited.

At last Sergeant Wilde stood up. "We're all here... but one. According to the book we will just take it easy and regain our strength. I've checked the tapes and looked at the optical films and recorded sound. Tau Ceti is dead ahead and we are about one month out." He paused, as each word was painful to utter. "We are on schedule. All systems are operational. We seem to have suffered no damage, either through meteorites or deterioration. Our oxygenation system has worked perfectly. One year back the seeds were automatically germinated and the robots have tended them ever since. Even if they hadn't we'd have enough bottled air to last until well after a month."

"If there's a planet," said Horton hoarsely. "Wilde didn't even look at it." "Doc Trowbridge, you will check everyone over? Set up your own schedules

and post 'em. Sergeant Clifford, check the food storage. Sergeant Jarl, check the weapons. Sergeant Torres, prepare a schedule of exercise routines for the book. Corporal Volk, prepare a damage report from end to end, just in case the sensors missed something. There's no hurry on any of this. We can start tomorrow." He paused for a moment, started to say something more, and stopped. "Corporal Pavin, form a burial party tomorrow."

Pavin said, "Yes, sir," and the other noncoms nodded. "What's it look like?" asked Erin.

Sergeant Wilde said, "We better start thinking up names for eight planets."

The smiles came slowly and in some cases painfully, but soon everyone was grinning widely. Almost twelve light years and they had hit a "treasure" of eight planets.

"One has to be habitable," whispered Hoff, at Jarl's left.

"Optimist," Jarl said, but he secretly agreed. They couldn't sacrifice everything, possibly their lives, and not have one good planet.

"We'll circle each planet and do a full survey on every spectrum," Wilde said. "Then pick our best shot and go down."

Jarl looked at Erin, then at Clifford and Sergeant Jennie Torres. They were all grinning.

"What are you all smiling about?" Wilde said. "The air could be perfect, the gravity one Earth standard, the flora beautiful and edible and there could be four billion insects per person. Or fungus that creeps under your skin and dies. Or bacteria that blasts your eyeballs."

"I thought we had shots against most everything," Jennie Torres said.

"Most everything isn't everything," Wilde leered.

"Now they tell us," Clifford said. "They lied to us before, didn't they?" he said to Jarl, who shrugged.

"Let's get back into shape. This time the dinosaurs might be real."

Sergeant Wilde, Jarl, Clifford, and Torres sat or leaned on pieces of equipment as they watched the tape of the high speed probe unrolling on the screen. They had looked at all of the planets and were reviewing the one they had called Sabertooth, after a peculiar peninsula that looked like the head of a screaming tiger.

"It's the obvious choice," said Torres said. "About sixty percent water, lots of lakes, mountains, plant life."

"Elliptical orbit, a gravity of Point Nine, which will be easy to take," Clifford said, "and a sixty-five degree inclination, almost like Earth's, which will give us some seasons."

"All right," Wilde said, "but what's wrong with it?"

"Storms. That mountain range there is pretty high, about as high as Everest, and there are three more almost as high running down through those islands and that chain of small continents. The winds are channelled and get pretty rough."

"So we don't colonize there," Jennie said. "There is plenty of room on five of those mini-continents. There might be some earthquake activity with all those plates moving. That's what forms those big mountains, you know. Maybe some volcano action, too, but we haven't detected any as yet."

Wilde nodded. "The rest of the planets just won't do not even that nice flat moon around Aagard. So this one is it. I say we land here," he said, freezing the unrolling tape and pointing at a fertile valley. The others nodded.

"Aagard?" Wilde said with a smile. "You name that like that long list of officially approved planet names they sent with us?"

Wilde looked disgustedly at the big dark man. "A list of politicians, kings, and bureaucratic names. If they want their name on something let them come out here and stick it on themselves."

The planets they had discovered around Tau Ceti had been named one hilarious and slightly drunken night as they reviewed all the probe tapes. In the order out from the sun they were: Venus, a small dead planet named for the arid one of Jarl's squad, Barbara Powers, had come from; Geronimo, for a reddish desert planet swept with great windstorms; Tarzan, for the medium-sized jungle world that was far too warm; Sabertooth, for the future home. Aagard, named both for the mythical Norse heaven and for Corporal Betty Perry's home ark; Juno, for the huge gas planet—the moons were Vesta, Artemis, and Hermes, mixing nicely both Greek and Roman mythology; Beethoven, for the musical gas planet with a dozen good-sized moons; Galileo, for the small cold and very distant ball of rock and ice.

"Tomorrow we land," Wilde said. "We'll just take the necessities. Vimmichino and Sen Yung will stay with the ship. They'll even out the squads. We will land at dawn on target site."

"Yes, sir," the sergeants said in unison.

Planetfall, thought Jarl. A whole brand new planet.

The excitement within him was almost too much to handle. All his life he had read stories of daring adventurers zooming off to new planets under strange suns. He had seen the battles with weird aliens across a hundred wall screens. He had "been there" when Captain Laser landed a planet, when Mentarus peeled the Starling planet Kravok like an orange, using only the power of his mind, linked with the mysterious Cholan entities. As a child he had laughed and jeered at the ancient tapes of man landing on the moon. How primitive it had all seemed!

And now he, Jarl Veevol, was about to land on an uninhabited planet twelve light years from the old Columbia ark, from New Washington and sleeping four to a bed, from sidewalks and city domes and yeast-blooms. The heroes of his youth had nothing on him, he thought. Not one damn thing!

With a certain swagger Jarl returned to the main room and found Erin Dunnigan packing her kit. Their eyes met and she smiled a slow, knowing smile. She patted close her pack and rose, to follow her man to a place where they could be alone.

The lander dropped away from the belly of the *Rip Van Winkle* and floated off into a landing orbit. Jim Adamson was piloting, and Sergeant Wilde watched over his shoulder. The rest looked at the planet through the readout screens. They

were packed in tightly, and each was slung with Magnum lasers, full field pack, sidearm lasers, protective clothing, and radiohelmet.

The probes had skimmed the atmosphere during the night, searching for any sort of electromagnetic activity, and had then flown even lower, sampling the air and analyzing for bacteria. The ship's computer had landed the probe at the target site and monitored as dawn approached. The planet seemed harmless.

"Sabertooth," Mr. Chard said in her accented English. "Is that not a rather fearsome name? How can we feel proud of a home with such a deadly sounding name?"

Sergeant Glover Clifford looked at his squad member from under the tilt of his helmet. "You name planet Dano or Sweetiepie and you might forget it has dangers you don't know about. Give it a name like Sabertooth



**They had found a world which, from orbit, seemed ideal. A new home for them with room to grow—room to live. Unfortunately, that world had natives which they thought otherwise.**

or Gorgon or Lookout or you'll remember."

The young girl nodded and then Sergeant Wilde said, "Erin, you're the first. Everyone watched closely as the terrain of the new planet developed."

They passed over an immense mountain range, snow-capped and with hundreds of glaciers descending into the valleys with their slow gait. Then another range, not quite as high, cloud-shrouded and white. The sun was just touching the peaks and the foothills beyond were just beginning to clear. On the search screen the terrain was clearly defined and the pulsebeat of the landed probe beckoned them. They passed over a linked complex of peaks and valleys. The terrain was the floor of the course of a large river for a few kilometers, but it veered off to the south, cutting through a range

of mountains and disappearing.

The sun was brightening the colors now and Jarl saw the green of the grass, the grey-blue of rivers and lakes, and then the flatter plain of the landing site. The lander swept over the probe and circled, coming back to land not thirty meters from the tiny robot ship.

"Out!" shouted Sergeant Wilde. "Out! Standard perimeter, fifty meters! Move! Move!"

The men and women tumbled out, leaping from the ship and running hard for the sectional one-third of the perimeter. Jarl was only dimly aware of reddish columns rising from thick green plants, blue trees with green and gold leaves, a red-brown earth dotted with stones and small green and purple plants. Something small and six-legged skittered out of Jarl's path as he plunged through the brush. He was in the center of his squad line, with Corporal Volk and Corporal Perry at either end.

"Down!" The line of humans three themselves flat, their big laser rifles at the ready. Jarl took time then to take a quick look around. The squads had completed the perimeter with the lander in the center. Nothing moved.

The wind was gentle, coming down off the towering mountains to the west. A breeze of green trees with white flowers lay directly in front of Jarl, and he searched the dimness beneath the foliage for any kind of movement.

"Report!" Wilde said in their ears.

"No sign," Jarl said. "Clear. Nothing moving."

The other squads reported similarly. "Squad leaders, send out scouts," Wilde ordered from his position in the big laser turret.

"Watts! Hoff! Plankers out here," Wiry Hoff came up fast, but Sharon Watts was not far behind. They ran in a standard zigzag to cover by some rocks, then separated. Hoff entered the forest warily and Jarl wished he could see what picture his helmet camera was sending back to the command screen. Watts ran along the edge of the forest and went up a rise. She approached the spot cautiously, then crept over it and disappeared.

"Watts?" he said quietly.

"Beats me," Wiry Hoff said, "she said, 'Biggest thing I've seen in some sort of beastie about the size of a rabbit, but it ran away.'"

"Hoff?"

"Nothing here, Sarge. Some of these trees have fruit, though. You want me to bring some back?"

"Jarl," Jarl switched bands and reported to Wilde.

"Scouts don't see anything dangerous."

"Keep 'em out while Jennie's flankers found a plant with some kind of purple pineapples growing on it."

"I think I see one over here, too," Jarl said. "Should I have them bring in samples?"

"Not yet. We have to secure everything first. Send back half of your squad and we'll start putting up a bubble dome."

"Yes, sir," Jarl switched bands again and said, "Erin, Bertha, Linc, Kono, Hal, you go back with Corporal Volk and help put up the bubble dome."

Jarl returned to scanning the horizon, but after a moment he looked down at the red-brown earth. It was pebbles and the pebbles were gray, green, blue, white, bronze, black, and violet. He felt the soil with his gloved hand, rubbing a pinch of the alien dirt between his fingers.

Sub, doth, four rocks out of Tau Ceti, And I said there was no adventure in dirt, he thought wryly.

"You can open your helmets," Wilde said. "The nitrogen is just a ding lung and the oxygen is just a spot over Earth's, and it's not a lot worse. It's about twice as much argon. It won't smell like the scented recycled shit they pump into you in the arks, but it is at least brand new air."

All around him his squad began to open their face-plates. Jarl reached up and flipped his open. He took a deep breath and smiled. It was cool and brisk, with the feeling of distant snow and nearby spice. There was fresh, new grass and several things he couldn't identify. If I could, he thought, it wouldn't be as much fun.

The first bubble dome was up, topped with a laser turret, and the lander had gone back up for another load and had brought down Vimmichino and Sen Yung. It was with only one orbit, closer in than the *Rip Van Winkle*, and set for quick, automatic recall, holding right at the edge of a reentry course.

Jarl came out of the dome and looked around. The brush had been cleared to a hundred meters, then to the edge of the forest. Various sensors patrolled the perimeter and three unsleeping robots were backup.

Erin came out, followed by Clifford. They, too, scanned the horizon. "Erin," Clifford said, "this is beginning to get boring. There are no trees, no themum-headed eight-armed aliens? Where are the big-domed elders of an ancient race? Where are the



vampire-rabbits, the three-meter octopoids, the blobs of intelligent protoplasm?"

"You, too, huh?" Erin said.

"We saw too many tapes and read too much trash," Jarl said. He waved his hand around them. "Isn't this enough? An authentic alien world, all ours, as sweet a paradise as you ever hope to see."

Erin sighed. "Sounds like famous last words," she said.

"What's the matter with you two?" Jarl said. "You want this to be one long siege from invisible elephants, twenty-meter dragons, evil mad queens, or purple creepy-crawlies or what?"

"I didn't grow up to become a farmer," said Clifford, the former warlord of the Magharbi Marauders, the toughest gang in one of the biggest arcologies around Washington.

Jarl laughed. "I feel the same way. I thought this was going to be an *adventure*, but so far all we've done is crash burn and set up the dome." The three friends sighed in agreement.

"Maybe something will happen when we go scouting," Erin said.

"Maybe," Clifford said.

"All right, you three, get to work," Sergeant Wilde came out of the airlock and pointed towards the south. "Get your people working there on putting in the seeds. Set up the vibrators to scare off those damn bluebirds. Let's move it."

"Come on, farmer boy," Clifford said.

They took two steps and froze. A figure stood on the rise to the east, wearing a dark red robe. Two more joined him, wearing brown. They looked perfectly human, which surprised Jarl more than if they had been green with fifteen big yellow eyes.

Wilde pressed the alarm stud on his command belt and the signal beeped in every helmet and on every equipment belt. The three squads rushed to their stations. The turret whirled around to cover the humanoid figures, which had now grown to a dozen.

"Easy, easy," Wilde said into his mike. "First contact procedures. Take it slow. Don't do anything sudden. Don't shoot until I do, if I do."

They all studied the group and Erin lowered her magnifier and clicked it off. "They look absolutely human. Almost too human. In fact, they look familiar!"

"Easy, I see it," Wilde said. "Jennie, you and Clifford watch the perimeter. We'll keep an eye on this part."

They watched the group approach over the rough ground. They looked with open curiosity at the dome around them, at the Earthmen, at the weapons, the dome, the unloaded containers of equipment, with an almost childlike innocence.

"Where are you from?" Sergeant Wilde said.

"Would you desire more of us?" the Christ-man asked.

Wilde shook his head impatiently. "Are there more of you? Where is your village or town or fort or whatever?"

The man in the red robe gestured vaguely back towards the way they had come. "Our home is back there, Sergeant Eril Wilde. Would you like to see it?"

"No," Wilde said bluntly. "Not now, Jennie? Cliff?"

"Not now," Sergeant Eril said in unison.

Sergeant Wilde eyed the thirteen men a moment, then spoke. "We will come to your home tomorrow, if that is all right with you. In the morning. Some of us will stay here. We will bring gifts."

The Christ-man smiled. "Very well," he said. He raised his hand and made the sign of the cross. "Peace." He turned and the figures behind parted without a word and then followed the red-clad figure to the ridge and

My nay-in i-as Jay-russ Christ."

"Jesus Christ!" Hoff said explosively.

The bearded man turned towards the scowling Hoff, still smiling, and said, "Ye-as?"

Sergeant Wilde snapped out an order for quiet. His hand was casually resting on the butt of his holstered Magnum laser. "You say you are Jesus Christ? Our Jesus Christ?"

The bearded man turned back to Wilde with a slightly puzzled look on his still-smiling face. "Ye-as? You did not expect me-her?"

Wilde's lips were a thin, wry smile. "No. In fact, I didn't expect to ever see you. Or your father."

"M-my father i-as not here. Would y-u like to see him?"

"Come on, Sergeant," Hoff said, "this is a hustle, some kind of wild rip." He gripped his weapon and looked from Wilde to the group of natives.

Wilde gave him a black look that brought Hoff up short. Then Wilde turned his attention back to the group. "And these are the Apostles, I presume?"

The man that called himself Jesus Christ smiled and gestured towards them. "Ye-as. Thi-s i-as Peter . . . Timothy . . . Thomas . . . Matthew . . . Mark . . ."

"All right," Sergeant Wilde said in a grim voice. "Enough. What is it you want?"

The bearded man peered at Wilde again, his eyes clear and innocent. "We do not want anything, Sergeant Eril Wilde. You came to us. How may we help you?"

"Sergeant," Jarl said softly, "his speech has changed."

The man before Sergeant Wilde looked at Jarl with a smile. "Yes, I am learning your language. Originally, mine was a mixture of Aramic and—"

"All right," Wilde snapped. "So you think you're Christ and somehow you are here on Sabertooth?"

The bearded figure in the red robe looked slightly amazed. "Such a fearsome name, Sergeant Eril Wilde. You may, of course, call it anything you wish, but I prefer Earth."

"Are there more like you?" Wilde asked, looking over their heads at the ridges.

In their helmets they heard Jennie Torres say, "Nothing here," Clifford agreed. "Quiet all around."

"More? Like us?" The Christ figure looked slightly bewildered. "No. Not like us. Would you desire more like us?"

over it.

"Jennie, send two to follow them away, Turret, keep a watch on them and on our men. Clifford, put scouts out in the other direction. Keep close, but cover it good. Jarl, put two scouts out."

He was answered with a chorus of *Yes, sir!*

"Sergeant and corporals meet in ten minutes in the dome," he added, then turned and went inside.

Ten minutes later Jarl, his corporals Betty Perry and Joe Volk, Clifford's corporals John Pavin and Lai Chong Sung, and Jennie's corporals Petr Kalinin and Catharine Dufosse sat or stood around Sergeant Wilde in the mess hall dome. Wilde looked around and then asked, "Well, what do you think?"

"Something's songo," Clifford said.

"They don't say anything and sort of like the real thing," Lai Chong Sung said. "But they can't be. Can they?"

Wilde shrugged and looked at John Pavin, who had his hand up. "They're . . . too good, Sergeant. The perfect WASP set of myth-figures."

"Maybe those myth-figures were right," Catharine Dufosse said. "God is . . . everywhere."

There were several skeptical grunts, but Sergeant Wilde held up his hand. "Keep an open mind. What if they are really who they say they are?"

"They don't say," Catharine said.

"All right, so what if he is what he says he is? What have we to fear? Isn't this every religious person's dream?"

Jarl grunted his skepticism. "Not everyone is a religious type, Sergeant." He smiled. "Certainly not this lot."

"Maybe . . ." Betty Perry spoke hesitantly and Wilde encouraged her with a gesture. "Maybe they are something else who want us to think they are harmless. Can you think of a better set of images?"

"But everyone would have a different idea of . . . oh, you mean, they are doing this telepathically?" Petr Kalinin said. "But we all would have a different idea about what threatens him and what doesn't. Like Jim Adamson isn't at all afraid of spiders but they freak Bannister. Reiko can handle snakes but Kristiana would walk around an arcology to avoid meeting one."

Betty chewed at her lip. "Yes, but I think we'd all agree that a set of religious figures would offer the least threat."

"Why didn't I see Buddha then?" Lai Chong asked.

"The Christ group would be a good common denominator," Betty said. "If we were predominantly of oriental background we would probably have seen Buddha, and maybe some monks."

"Telepathic control?" Sergeant Wilde said softly.

Betty nodded. "A controlled hallucination. I came back home I was a shit for a mind-reading act once. The thing was, he could really do it, in a simple sort of way. One simple thing at a time, if you were concentrating on it. He put me in traces and . . . well, he could control me to a certain extent. I did think I didn't want to do, really, except he could get behind my own defenses and his suggestions would seem to be coming from myself. That's how I got into trouble with the law . . . and why I'm here, I guess."

"Can you recognize the feeling, or the state or whatever it is?" Jarl asked.

"No, I don't think so. I mean, with Kempter I knew I was going into a trace, but . . . no, I don't think I'd know if there . . . whatever they are . . . were doing the same thing."

"What do we do, Sergeant?" Joe Volk asked.

"We get a good night's sleep. We keep the guards alert. We go out there tomorrow in full battle dress and we wait and see what they will see."

"Shall we call down the ladder and go over in that?" asked Clifford, "or do we keep it overhead with a few good snipers in it?"

"No, I want it to look as peaceful as possible. I want to be as peaceful as possible. Peaceful, but not wide open, get me?"

They all nodded. Wilde dismissed them and Jarl joined Erin in their cubicle. "Who has the watch?" she asked.

"Jennie's squad. We'll have it tomorrow," Jarl stretched out on the double bunk and Erin came into his arms. They were quiet for several long moments.

"That was weird today," she said. "Do you think he was really Jesus?"

Jarl shrugged. "Dunno. Betty thinks it's some kind of telepathy or hallucination or something. That we all thought we were seeing what we saw."

"But so did the cameras," Erin said. Jarl raised his head and looked at the video raises eyebrows. "Hir Iwamiya got the whole thing. He was in the turret and turned on the infrared monitors and switched to straight video. The cameras saw just what we saw."

Jarl dropped his head back on the pillow. "Damn. There goes the telepathic theory. What in the hell did we see?"

They were quiet a moment, then Erin spoke. "Do you regret coming out here?"



"They're starting to move," Clifford said from the flank.

"Easy, I see it," Wilde said. "Jennie, you and Clifford watch the perimeter. We'll keep an eye on this part."

They watched the group approach over the rough ground. They looked with open curiosity at the dome around them, at the Earthmen, at the weapons, the dome, the unloaded containers of equipment, with an almost childlike innocence.

"Where are you from?" Sergeant Wilde said.

"Would you desire more of us?" the Christ-man asked.

Wilde shook his head impatiently. "Are there more of you? Where is your village or town or fort or whatever?"

The man in the red robe gestured vaguely back towards the way they had come. "Our home is back there, Sergeant Eril Wilde. Would you like to see it?"

"No," Wilde said bluntly. "Not now, Jennie? Cliff?"

"Not now," Sergeant Eril said in unison.

Sergeant Wilde eyed the thirteen men a moment, then spoke. "We will come to your home tomorrow, if that is all right with you. In the morning. Some of us will stay here. We will bring gifts."

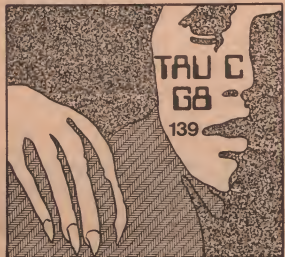
The Christ-man smiled. "Very well," he said. He raised his hand and made the sign of the cross. "Peace." He turned and the figures behind parted without a word and then followed the red-clad figure to the ridge and

Jarl shook his head. "No. After they did a hustle on this whole crew of hustlers we just weren't fit for anything else. We all had this whole new image of ourselves. They really set us up good. I guess they figured if we could survive first in the jungle world of the arcologs, then in their money but deadly alien jungles, then we could survive out here. And if we didn't, what was lost? A few dozen troublemakers, that's all. But I don't regret coming, that's where it's the last laugh on them. They're a hundred years dead back on a world choking to death, and I'm out here on a brand new planet under a brand new sun with my best girl."

"Who loves you?"  
 "What more could a man ask?"  
 "You might ask me what a woman could ask."  
 "All right, what could a woman ask?"  
 "Well, since you asked, how do you feel about that inflexible discipline? Do you think making love with one of your own squad would destroy the delicate balance of command you have achieved?"

"No. In the manual of *Interstellar Explorers and Purveyors of Terran Wisdom* it says nothing against such lewd and lascivious behavior."

"There is no *Interstellar Manual of Outer Space Rules and Regs*, or whatever you said."  
 "Oh, in that case, I guess we can do it without fear of official reprisal."



They found Catharine Dufoe's body at dawn. It was lying just beyond the perimeter. Her battle suit had been ripped open and most of her body eaten.

"Eaten?" snapped Wilde, buckling on his command belt.

"Yes, sir," Sergeant Torres said, her mouth trembling slightly. "It was very quiet last night until about two hours past midnight, then we heard some noise in her sector. Sounded like wind in those trees, or some kind of night birds mating or fighting or something. I... I asked Cathy what she saw and she said it was nothing, that everything was all right."

"On the radio?"

"Yes, sir, then I walked over there. Everything did seem all right and it did sound like something just fluttering around in the trees. Then we heard something on the opposite side, and I went down there and saw something in the trees, just a glimmer, and I stayed around in that section with her until dawn. Then I... I did a sweep and didn't find Cathy. So I sent Petyurus out and he found her."

"Someone ripped over her guts and no one heard a thing?"

"No, sir. Petyurus and Muir flanked her along there and they heard nothing, but they said the birds, or whatever they were, made a fair amount of noise. Curt Hugbee's jets malfunctioned and he dropped a thousand meters and she snagged on one of those fligme minarets. Broke an arm and a leg but it didn't tear loose." He flipped the shreds of fabric back over the torn flesh. "That's how strong this stuff is and this jumper was torn like shimmercloth."

Jarl flipped back the plastic cover and tried not to look sick. He watched Wilde's face instead. The tough sergeant didn't seem sickened by the mess that remained in the ripped battle suit. He fingered the bloody edge of the material thoughtfully.

"You know what it takes to rip one of these things?" he asked no one in particular. "Eight, ten years ago we dropped on the *Scheherazade* to stop that terrorist raid. Why those zongos would want to rip up a pleasure dome, I don't know, but we were fired there in a hurry. Curt Hugbee's jets malfunctioned and he dropped a thousand meters and she snagged on one of those fligme minarets. Broke an arm and a leg but it didn't tear loose." He flipped the shreds of fabric back over the torn flesh. "That's how strong this stuff is and this jumper was torn like shimmercloth."

Wilde stood up. He looked down at the body and at the drying splatters of blood on the ground around it. "She does look eaten, but look at her face."

Jarl looked but his stomach rebelled. It seemed obscene that her dark, pretty face was untouched, with a serene expression, while the rest of her body was dismembered and ravaged.

"She either didn't feel it or didn't expect it, or..." Wilde let his words hang in the air. Then he pressed his command stud. "Sergeant Clifford, assemble the detail at once. Sergeant Torres, you will go with us and back as reserves. Sergeant Jarl, get up a burial detail of things ready to bury her when we return. Tighten up the perimeter and set every alarm we have."

"Yes, sir!"

Jarl slipped the plastic sheet back over the remains of Cathy Dufoe, then switched to his squad line and began sending orders.

Jarl watched Sergeant Wilde lead the two fully armed and armored squads out, then he went into the command node and watched through the helmet cameras.

They squads headed in the direction the Christ-figure had indicated and after about an hour's walk the scouts saw a clearing with a stream running through it. In the cliffs on either side were caves and from the caves came the figures of Christ and his apostles.

Sergeant Torres spread her squad along the western edge of the cliffs, guns at the ready but without appearing hostile. Sergeant Wilde walked straight in, bulkier than usual in full battle armor. Jarl took the picture from his helmet camera and saw him approach the red-robed figure, who held up his hand and made the sign of the cross.

"All right," Sergeant Wilde said, "what's going on? I lost a man last night. What sort of creatures you got here, anyway? And I want to know what you are up to!"

The Christ-figure smiled benevolently and Jarl missed his response as Erin entered the node. "He still calling everyone a 'man'?" she asked. Jarl nodded and put his fingers to his lips.

"Don't give me that chute-slop," Wilde growled. "Something is zongo here and I want to know what it is! Sergeant Clifford, take a detail and look into those caves. Sergeant Torres, keep an eye out on the perimeter."

"Please, Sergeant Eric Wilde," Christ said, "there is no need for this. We are peaceful. You know we are peaceful. Who could be less of a threat to you than we?"

"Sounds like Betty was right," Jarl said. He reached forward and picked up a mike and presented Wilde's personal button. "Sergeant, this is Jarl. Shall I call down the ladder and put a few of my men in it?"

Wilde didn't speak but the picture swung right and left twice. The expression on the Christ-man changed. He looked a little more apprehensive and the men behind him stirred, but none of them looked angry or hostile.

"Look," Erin said, pointing to the small screen where Clifford's helmet camera was aimed at a pile of bones at the back of a cave. Clifford, Jarl punched both



**Their own worst nightmares  
 were haunting them, and  
 unless they could be  
 exorcized they were going to  
 lose their new planet.**

Clifford's button and Wilde's.

"Sergeant, Cliff has found some bones in the back of a cave. They look as though they are from some large animal. But not human."

"Why would they keep bones?" Erin asked. "Especially if they are... you know... *us*, them, who they say they are."

"Sergeant Clifford," Wilde said, "we are pulling back. Sergeant Torres, cover us until we are up on the cliff. Move it."

Wilde kept looking back at the group of robed figures, but they didn't move. Soon they were out of sight.

Jarl patrolled the perimeter quietly. Spaced between each live sentry was a Gard-all, a pole as thick as his wrist which had video cameras, infrared detectors, sound sensors, and other devices. There was a sharpened rod coming out of the bottom, which made the placement of the electronic guardians easy.

The night seemed quiet. There was no moon and the stars were crisp and clear overhead, brilliant in constellations foreign to Jarl.

"Everything all right?" he asked Kono Sen Yung. "The arks were never this quiet, Sarge," the young sentry said.

"The quiet make you nervous?"

"I'm not used to it, if that's what you mean. But maybe it will keep me alert, huh?"

Jarl grinned and slugged his shoulder and moved on. He spoke to Bertha Morgan, then Lincoln Schroeder. The tall, tough black man had been a bold thief back in Chicago's massive Sandburg arcology, but he was edgy and apprehensive. "What do you think got Cathy?" he asked Jarl.

"We don't know, Linc, so stay alert. There was a lot of bird activity, or something, over in those trees last night, so call me if anything like that starts again. "Right, Sarge. You'll be the first to know."

Jarl continued around the circle, past Anna Radovsky, who had been shipped to them from Collective Building Ten, a 410,000 person ark in Leningrad, then past George Hoff, from Wyoming's Windmountain ark. He spoke briefly to Erin, then moved on to check with



Tom Miller, a tall, blonde boy who was big on muscle and no bunsen burner with brains.

"Different than *Duberta Towers*, Miller?"

"You mean the jungle or bush or whatever you want to call it? Naw, I used to go out into the bush on hunts all the time. Runaways, zongos on the juice, you know. That was before I zapped one dumbie too many and got busted out of the Capetown police." He sighed. "That was some good times. After that it was just one chute-slop job after another, until... until here."

"Well, watch out for anything different out there." Jarl couldn't see him smiling but he could tell by his voice that he was. "If the natives get restless I'll give you a blip."

Jarl moved on to Sharon Watts, from Chicago's *Skyline*, and then to a patrol pal, Barbara Powers, from Austria's *Claudecastle*.

"Betty at the screens?" Volk asked.

Jarl said yes and they stood a moment, saving the night. "This could be a good place," Jarl said.

"Ya, it could," then a moment of silence and then Volk said, "You think he is Christ, maybe, sergeant?"

"No, I don't. But then I don't know what he is instead, either."

Jarl moved on in his patrol, past Barbara Powers, who just nodded, and completed the circle with Kono Sen Yung. Then he went into the dome and checked with Corporal Perry.

"Quiet as a mouse," she said. Jarl sat down in the second seat and aimed his brooding gaze at the screens.



Each Gard-all was represented by four screens, a video, an infra-red, a dilating screen that beeped if disturbed past a setting, and a thin-line screen that indicated sound waves.

After a moment, Betty said, "You think they're fake, don't you?"

"Something gutted Cathy. She didn't commit harikari. It may not have been our religious friends, but it was definitely something. Something strong and deadly."

"I ran all the tapes this afternoon. They were there, just as we saw them, so it wasn't some kind of hallucination."

"Those bones worry me, though," Jarl said. They lapsed into a long silence, then Jarl roused himself for a second tour of the perimeter. He did a quick tour of the base of the dome, where the three robots were stationed, and all was well. He reversed his earlier direction and started with Barbara Powers, then Corporal Volk, Sharon and Miller. He stopped to speak to Erin.

"Everything all right?"

"Out there or inside me?" she asked.

"Feeling nervous?"

"Yep. Not afraid to admit it."

"Good. Fear keeps people alert. Just as long as fear doesn't control you or turn you into a snail."

"You sound like Sergeant Wilde," Erin said.

Jarl laughed softly. "Yeah, I guess he wears off on you. You think he's a bastard and too rough on you, but after awhile, well, you realize he's trying to make you a survivor."

"He took a big chance coming out here," Erin said. "I mean, he didn't have to. Like us, I mean."

"We didn't have to, either, but those bastards brainwashed us until we weren't much good around an ark. I bet . . ."

There was a sudden scream of such chilling terror that both Jarl and Erin were frozen for a moment. Jarl was the first to react. He flipped on the helmet intercom and ordered everyone to stay where they were. "Does anyone know where it came from? Betty?"

"Linc's section, Jarl! Something is going on there, something's moving! Oh, my god!"

"Betty! Corporal Perry! What is it?"

There was the sound of gagging over the radio and Jarl started running towards the opposite side of the perimeter, laser in hand.

"Jarl, this is Bertha! Something grabbed Linc! He fired but I think he missed. Oh, my god, Jarl, it looked like a spider, like a huge spider maybe two, three meters high!"

Jarl ran hard, calling out to Betty to activate the lights. There was a sudden flare of bright white light from the top of the turret and Jarl came to a stop suddenly.

At the edge of the turret an enormous spider, with huge hairy legs and a bulging, obscene body, walked with deliberate speed. When the light came on the creature stopped and turned and quite clearly Jarl could see a human leg protruding from the vicious mouth below the almost hawk-like face on the front side of the bulging hairy body.

Without thinking Jarl started firing. The creature screamed, a thin, weird, almost inaudible screech. Other lasers, heavier lasers, joined in from different directions. The immense arachnid twisted almost slowly, lifting one leg, then another. Its mouth opened in a thin scream and the chewed, bloody remnants of what had once been Linc Schroeder fell out.

Two lasers stopped firing as their wielders stopped to vomit, but the pulses still tore into the great creature. Jarl aimed at its head and saw it burst, spewing gray-green blobs, then the whole mountain of hideousness shuddered and collapsed. For several seconds laser beams still poured into the corpse, rent it, bursting the bloated body, spilling juices and formless blobs of odious flesh.

"Cease firing!" Jarl ordered.

"Sergeant Jarl, what is going on?" Sergeant Wilde appeared, shrugging into the chestplate of his battle armor and locking it down.

"Something . . . that thing . . . brought down Linc Schroeder."

"Schroeder dead?"

"Yes, sir. Both of them. But Linc was . . . was dead when we . . ."

"Turret, sweep the perimeter with everything, including visible light. Guards, check in! Jarl, have someone bring in Schroeder."

As the perimeter guards checked in Jarl gestured to Anna Radovsky and Hoffend and told them to get a platoon bag. Then he walked out, gun still in hand, and looked down at Linc Schroeder.

He wasn't even recognizable.

Jarl raised his eyes and looked at the steaming corpse of the giant spider. "What kind of world is this?" he said aloud.

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by Neil Shapiro

# It's Not Just a Telescope



The most memorably enjoyable science fiction imparts to the reader a sense of wonder. This feeling of being transported beyond one's everyday problems and travels into a wider, vaster realm is familiar not only to SF readers but to thousands of amateur astronomers as well.

You might not have seriously considered entering astronomy for a hobby before now. Perhaps the expense has deterred you, or the seeming complexity offered in the myriad models of equipment and accessories available, or the mathematics you've seen in Star Atlases and charts. If so, you have been missing out on quite an experience.

Being alone with your telescope, or among other enthusiasts at a star party can be a fantastically enjoyable, intellectually and spiritually rewarding experience. Imagine yourself catching a glimpse of deep sky wonders the naked eye cannot even perceive and gaining a first hand knowledge of the universe and of Earth's place in the celestial scheme.

Expensive? Well, like everything else it would have been best to start four or five years ago. However, less than two hundred post-inflation dollars can open wide the doorway for you into this starry pastime.

Like other hobbyists and professionals, astronomers have their own specialized language and vocabulary. It can be easily mastered. Much of astronomy depends, it is true, on math. That too can be mastered; at least, enough for all but the most advanced stages of the science.

In this column I will attempt to help not only those of you already into this hobby (though I hope you too will find items of interest here) but mostly those of you who are just getting into the field. The more advanced amateur already has a wide variety of publications and periodicals devoted to his needs. Here, I hope I may take some of the confusion out of just beginning to observe the universe above.

If you have ever priced telescopes you know they come in many price ranges, from the absurdly inexpensive to the J. Paul Getty class of availability. The claims made can sometimes be as confusing as the prices. Specifications are, for the newcomer, hard to understand at best and impossible to decipher at worst.

What type of scope should you buy? What size should it be? How should it be mounted? How many eyepieces should you have? All of these questions and many more confront the inexperienced buyer.

## REFRACTOR OR REFLECTOR?

Whether you first price scopes through catalogs, advertisements or even showrooms, this first experience among them becomes readily apparent. Which is the one to buy?

A reflecting telescope gathers and focuses incoming light by means of a specially curved and silvered mirror. This mirror, at the back of the tube, bounces the light forward and back up the tube to a much smaller mirror. The light is finally reflected into the eyepiece.

In the refracting telescope, a lens in the front of the tube focuses a direct image down the tube and into the eyepiece.

The refracting telescope is a closed tube, so it is much easier to keep clean. Because all the optics are set immovably, a refractor requires little or even no adjustment through the years. In a well made refractor, the color of the image is somewhat closer to the color of the real object than in the image given by a reflector.

Yet, the majority of amateurs own, use and love their reflecting telescopes.

A very basic reason is cost. A refractor might cost anywhere from three to eight times the price of a comparable reflector. For one thing, reflectors are much cheaper to manufacture as it is easier to shape a mirror properly than to grind a large lens.

I have had the opportunity to look through both types. Personally, I can see very little difference between the performance of a reflector vs. a refractor; not if both scopes are properly adjusted.

If money is no object, you may consider a refractor. Even then, most refractors are quite a bit less portable than a refractor. Unless you live out in the country, that is an important consideration.

All in all, I tend to recommend that a beginner purchase him or herself a good reflector.

## HOW BIG A SCOPE DO YOU NEED?

The other day I was in the toy department of a major New York City department store. On display was a small reflecting telescope, its cardboard tube covered with badly drawn renditions of galaxies and ringed planets. The copy on the box assured parents that if Junior was given such a scope (which, I vaguely recall, referred to less than twenty dollars), he could view objects at hundreds of times magnification—"close up!"

I didn't feel like taking off the cellophane and having to purchase the thing, but from what I could see, the lens seemed about a half-inch in diameter. Let's give the manufacturer the benefit of a doubt and suppose, without cheating, that the lens was perfectly made.

A good rule of thumb is that no power is usable if it exceeds 50X per inch of aperture. Aperture is the diameter of a telescope's mirror or lens. Beyond that limit the image will lose brightness, will no longer be clearly defined. Much above the limit, and the scope is worse than useless.

Therefore, the toy scope had a theoretical limit of 25X, figuring it as a half-inch aperture. In reality, with the way it was likely made, Junior would be lucky if he could just look through the eyepiece and see light on the other side of the lens.

I use this example to illustrate the maxim, which bears repeating, that usable magnification is about 50X per aperture inch. Most telescope dealers, and all serious manufacturers, are very reputable in this respect. However, if you are examining a six inch scope and the salesman tells you it will magnify something thousands and thousands of times over, run do not walk out of that showroom.

The best way to measure the size of a telescope is not by how much magnification it will provide, but by the size of the scope's main lens or mirror.

Telescopes for amateurs are readily available in reflecting sizes from three to twelve inches, and refractors from less than two to six. In this case, bigger is better if the quality of the optics is equal.

How much light a telescope gathers depends on the size of its main (primary) lens or mirror. Simply put, the more light it is capable of gathering the more stars you can see. And, as we have already seen, the larger the aperture the more magnification you may use.

Now, with the unaided eye most people can see stars down to magnitude six. (Magnitude refers to the brightness of a star. The higher the number, the dimmer. For instance, magnitude six is brighter than magnitude seven.)

A six inch aperture scope will show you stars almost as faint as magnitude thirteen. A twelve inch scope will take you all the way to magnitude fourteen. A small four and a quarter inch scope will take you slightly beyond magnitude twelve.

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# LANDING PARTY

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They went in low and fast, spreading out through the underbrush. Some small animals ran and hid, small rodent-like things with striped fur and a pale ochre lizard. Jarl's squad was in a cresent, in full battle gear, heavy Magnum lasers at the ready.

By the book, Jarl kept repeating to himself. By the book!

The helmet mikes made it easy to direct without making much noise and the squad moved efficiently. Wilde was at the center, just behind the line, in the position of squad commander rather than squad leader.

The area around the caves was deserted as the armored Earthmen threw themselves down around the rim of the cliff. "Jarl, take three men and go look," Wilde commanded.

"Anna! Hoff! Sharon!" The three troopers, almost anonymous in their battle gear, rose and started to the left, jumping down the trail with quick movements. Anna stopped at the bottom and Hoff ran past her to the next cover, then Sharon leaped gracefully past and crouched behind a boulder, her laser aimed. Jarl caught up, dodging from boulder to bush, and stopped at Sharon's rock.

"Nothing," she said.

There was no more cover, so Jarl gestured that they stay in place and he stepped out. He walked across the last meters of open ground cautiously, angling up the side of the first cave. He peered inside, but saw nothing. It suddenly occurred to him that he had seen none of the usual signs of a home, either now or on their earlier trip. He had put it off then because they were on an alien planet, with possibly quite different ways.

He stepped carefully into the cave and advanced into the darkness. "Well?" came Wilde's voice in his ear. "Nothing here so far, Sergeant. And that's bothering me. No pots, no tools, no clothing, nothing. Last time, too."

Wilde grunted and Jarl snapped on his helmet light. The cave petered out and narrowed down, but there was still a pile of bones at the rear. He turned and went to the mouth, ordering Hoff and Sharon to check the cave on the far side while he moved to the next nearest one.

After a few minutes Jarl stepped into the open. "Nothing down here, Sergeant. Not a damn thing. Dust, footprints of all kinds, but nothing. Except the bones."

Jarl heard a chuckle and he whirled, bringing the laser around in a practiced hip shot position. Leaning against the rock at the mouth of the cave was a fat, jolly Santa Claus, red suit, shiny black boots, long white beard, and everything.

The man laughed, the very epitome of the jolly fat man's cheery chuckle. "Not too observant, are you, my boy?" Santa said.

"Sergeant," Jarl said in a controlled voice. "There's a Santa Claus down here."

Jarl heard several exclamations over the comm line, but they stopped instantly at Wilde's growl. "How big?"

"What do you mean, how big? Santa-size. Red suit, beard, you know. But regular size."

"What he's doing?" Wilde asked.

"Grinning at me."

Santa laughed again, and turned to go back into the cave. Jarl took a step. "Hold it right there, Santa honey." The red-suited figure glanced back over his shoulder, still cheerfully grinning, but he didn't stop. Jarl's finger tightened on the trigger, but he did not fire.

"Sergeant, he's going back into the cave. He won't stop."

"Hoff! Watts! Radovsky! Cover Jarl. Go in and see what the hell is going on. But only as far as you have to."

Jarl ran up the slight slope and into the cave. He could just make out Santa walking briskly into the darkness, without benefit of light.

"Hold it, Santa!" Jarl said, his voice echoing. But Santa didn't stop. Jarl started trotting after him. Within a few meters his light didn't seem to penetrate very far. Jarl heard Hoff and the others scuffling in the dirt behind him as they took positions, then he stopped. The darkness ahead seemed impenetrable. The helmet light didn't do much good.

"Sergeant, U—"

Jarl's question was interrupted by a roar, the sound of something sharp and hard scraping on the rock, and then a frightening apparition burst forth from the gloom.



**He looked like Christ—but they knew that whatever else the planet might be, it wasn't Heaven.**

Red-skinned, horned and taloned, Satan himself flung his scaled body out of the blackness onto Jarl. Jarl heard a scream behind him as he went down, but he was already firing. A taloned paw tore the still flaring laser from his hand, shattering it into shards against the rock. Claws raked at Jarl's body, swift vicious swipes of satyr's feet and clutching hands.

For a second Jarl stared through his visor, face-to-face with the devil himself. He saw in vivid detail the long canine teeth, the froth and splatter of drool, the flick of the forked tongue, the blaring, insane eyes, the tiny tufts of spiky black hair around the two curved forehead horns. Then the image of Lucifer flung him against the wall, ripping at his armor.

Jarl was stunned, but his hands tugged at his hand laser, pulling it out and firing a steady stream of millisecond pulses into the toms of the beast. Satan's hand battered at the weapon but Jarl hung on and kept firing. Ruby-red beams from the cave mouth cut into the crimson body of the berserker monster, but for the longest moment nothing seemed to happen.

Jarl's laser failed, its circuits melted, and the horned devil raised his hand as if for a final, mortal blow. But the blow didn't come. The crimson creature spasmed, jerking away, and beginning a shambling run of but a few steps. The edges of the beast twitched and a rippling change of color seemed to sweep over it. The creature hit the far rock wall, and for a second was a rumped Christ, then a Jolly Santa, then several odd shapes in swift, spasmodic succession.

A laser beam from the cave mouth struck again and without a sound, the figure crumpled. Before he hit the floor he changed shape twice, into something ugly beautiful and somewhat feathery, then into a lizard with gaping red wounds. It hit the floor and rolled over, becoming a small motionless, grey-skinned biped about the size of a twelve-year-old.

Jarl sucked in air noisily and was aware that his comm line was a chaos of questions and exclamations. He sorted out Wilde's snarl and as the others calmed he gave a quick outline of what had happened.

In seconds Wilde was at the cavern mouth, blocking out the light, and his heels striking sparks on the rocky floor. He stood looking at the dead creature for only a moment before he turned to Jarl and examined his ripped and ragged battle dress.

"I'm all right," Jarl said, "just a little shook up and—" "Sergeant Wilde! We're being—" It was a frantic voice on the comm line from their base, stopped in mid-sentence.

"Sabertooth Base, this is Wilde! Come in! Sabertooth Base!" Wilde snarled and started back out the cave. "Skirmish line! We're going back home! Corporal Perry, take command of the squad!"

"Sergeant, I'm all right..." Jarl protested.

"Shut up. You look like you just lost a fight with a five-meter gamecock. Perry! Move em!"

Jarl started after Wilde and almost felt he steadied himself against the rock wall for a moment until the vertigo passed, then he trotted after Wilde.

Everyone was up the cliff and running and Jarl had to put on a burst of speed to catch up. "What the hell was that thing back there, sarge?" he asked. "Some kind of hypnosis?"

"Hypnosis didn't tear up your suit, Jarl," Wilde grunted. "Maybe some kind of shape-changers or..." something.

"Sergeant, what's happening back at the dome?" Volk asked anxiously.

"I don't know, so keep your eyes open!"

Wilde slowed them down when they sighted the dome. One whole side of the foandome had been ripped open and there was a hole on the other side where something big had broken out. Several bodies were scattered around, or parts of bodies. There was a splash of impossibly bright blood on a rock near the dome, and someone's head, still clutched in a broken laser.

Jarl was shocked, but he kept up with Wilde. Their water purifier was smashed, a cache of pressed food bricks was uncovered, and the contents scattered and missing. Reiko Izuno lay in a pool of blood, her legs missing, and one hand gnawed away. Her eyes stared into the skull and, then she died.

"What happened, Clifford?" Wilde asked in a hard voice.

"We thought they were you, Sergeant, honest. You were coming back, I mean, they were coming in, looking just like you, uniforms and everything."

"Shape-changers," Wilde muttered. "Came here while we were there. Pretty smart."

Horton was on the comm line. He told me something was zongo, but I really wasn't paying any attention. You... uh, they... were coming in fast, looking behind, like something was chasing them. I was paying attention to what was chasing it. My fault, sergeant, I should have listened to Horton."

"Never mind that. Then what happened?"

"They ran right into the petimeter and spread out, like they were going to set up a defense. I ran back in the dome to the command center. You ran in with me, I mean, this thing that looked just like you ran in with me. They were everywhere, Sergeant! All of a sudden you... it... changed! It was like something from a nightmare! Claws, scales, teeth—my god, sergeant, it was terrible!"

Clifford's eyes were still staring at the memory. "It killed Horton with one blow! I tried to kill me, but I fired at it. I had just enough room to get away! I ran out and it came out through the dome! Fitzgerald and I... Evans were right in front of it. It... it... grabbed them and... bit off their heads! Helms and everything! I kept firing, but my aim wasn't so good and..."

"Sergeant Wilde!" It was Corporal Lai Chong Sung, her lovely face distorted in fear. "Grogan's dead! Adamson and Mueller are missing! Oh, my god, Sergeant, they changed into dragons!"

"Dragons?" Wilde turned to Clifford. "Was yours a dragon?"

"No, it was something pretty horrible, but like something from a nightmare, not a dragon."

Wilde calmed everyone down with savage efficiency, giving them tasks and assigned them duties. The perimeter was reestablished, communications were returned, and the men came back to the base.

"Horton, Evans, Fitzgerald, Adamson, dead," Sergeant Jennie Torres reported in an emotionless voice. "Izuno, too. Kristiana Vinnichenko isn't expected to survive. The dark eyes flicked around the circle of sergeants and corporals. "Missing," Brigetti Perito, George Bannister, Richard Mueller."

"No trace?" Wilde asked.

"Part of what I think is Bannister's gear. And Mueller's hand."

"Twenty-three left. Out of thirty-seven," Wilde said. "Vinnichenko won't last the night, Doc says." Wilde turned to Corporal Pavin, who had his chest in bandages and his right arm in a sling. "What did they look like to you?"



"Some kind of robot, with metal claws. That is, the one that did this and carried off Bannister. I think another one looked like... um... well, like a sort of octopus, only different."

Wilde looked at Sergeant Torres. "You?"

"Like a devil. A devil out of the books. Forked tail, horns, everything."

"You were raised a Catholic, weren't you?"

Jennie nodded. "My family was Catholic even when the church was outlawed back in the Repression."

Wilde pointed at Pavin. "Why are you afraid of robots?"

"Me? I'm not... uh... yes, I am. I saw my... my father killed in one of the Circus when I was little and, uh..."

Wilde held up his hand. "Satan, the Devil... three-meter spiders... robots... nightmare figures... dragons. God knows what else. The fear images from our minds."

"This wasn't something we thought up!" Clifford exploded.

"I know it isn't. But that's where the... whatever they are got their ideas. From our fears."

"Christ and Santa?" Jarl said softly.

"The same thing in reverse. What sort of images frighten us the least? Our mothers, maybe? Buddha? Specific figures from our past? What group of figures would we be the least afraid of? That we could all agree on as being 'safe' even if we didn't believe in them?"

"And the spider was the other side of the coin?" Jennie Torres said. "Something none of us like, something we could all agree on as being horrible and terrifying, especially when it's three meters high."

"Right. Images to lull us, to paralyze us with fear. But not just hypnotic images. Those things are real. They become full-size figures with all the strengths and powers. When they were being looked at by all of us they changed into general figures of fear, or into specific images that each of us secretly feared."

Corporal Petr Kalinin spoke. "That's why it seemed familiar." He looked startled, then roused himself and continued. "The one that attacked me looked like Ivan Kragoff, the supervisor at Collective Building A, back in Odessa. He had everyone frightened. I grew up thinking there was no one more frightening than Kragoff." He looked slightly amused. "Kragoff. I was frightened of Kragoff. I saw him as an old man, and he was so feeble so plugged into a life support system... but in my mind, my little boy's mind..."

"What do we do now, Sergeant?" Jarl asked.

Wilde gave him a dark look. "There's an old military maxim. When in doubt, attack." Wilde grinned thinly at the tightening of their faces. "Look, you were trained as soldiers because that gives you the best possible advantage towards survival, not because Earth was a fascist government. You were given scientific training, too, but this situation calls for action. Until further

evidence disproves it, I'm going on the theory these are some kind of creatures with the ability to change shape."

"Like were-wolves?" Corporal Perry asked.

"Maybe. I don't know. That was a pretty persistent legend for a long, long time." Wilde shrugged his broad shoulders. "I don't think there are creatures that look like religious figures and big spiders and dragons and robots and all the other things. I think it's one group that... somehow... reads our minds or our vibes or something, and becomes something else."

The more rational answer is a variety of creatures with shapable physical construction," Pavin said.

"Do you believe it?" Petr Kalinin asked.

Pavin shook his head. "It is the more conventional explanation."

"Do you believe it?" Kalinin persisted.

"No," Pavin said. "The Sergeant's theory seems far-fetched, but somehow... right."

Wilde grunted again. "Any other explanations?" No one answered. Wilde looked from one to another and some of them shook their heads. "All right," he said, "we hit them at dawn."

"Hard?" Jarl asked.

"Hard," Wilde answered.

"What if they... come up with some more nightmare shapes?" Jarl asked. "It's pretty hard to fight a phobia or some fear that's really basic, maybe even genetic."

"I've been thinking about that Clifford, you and Jarl take a couple of men and go up to the Rip and bring down some lead shielding. I think I remember some in the manifest."

"Cover the helmets?" Jarl asked and Wilde nodded.

"But we don't know what will shield us from... from whatever it is they use."

"Know anything better?" Wilde asked. "We've got to at least try. Just use the helmets as forms and shape the stuff over. It doesn't have to look pretty. Leave an eye slit, and that's all."

"Suppose they can get at us even through the slit?" Jennie Torres asked.

"We'll carry a piece to slap on and you can direct the fire from here, using the helmet cameras."

"Firing blind?" Clifford asked.

Wilde nodded. "You'll face where she tells you and fire in that direction straight ahead. That way there will be no danger of panic."

Betty Perry pursed her lips, then smiled softly and asked Wilde a question. "What are you afraid of, Sergeant? What will you see?"

Wilde's dark eyes swung to the slim, young corporal.

"I'm afraid of no more and no less than anyone else, Perry, but I try not to let it panic me. That's the difference." Wilde looked around at the others. "There's nothing wrong with being scared. Fear is a good healthy sign. Dem, suicidal heroes I don't need. I do expect you to function even if you are so scared you need

to swab out your suits later on. Only the stupid and the fools don't get scared. The brave man—or woman—does what he or she is supposed to even if he or she is scared shiteless."

Wilde paused, then asked. "Anything else?" No one spoke, so Wilde looked at Perry again. "I'm scared, Corporal Perry, of the amateurs, of those who know how to do a job and don't, of those that are, of the incompetents... Does that answer your question?"

Betty nodded, a smile twitching at her lips. "Yes, sir."

"Oh-Five Hundred, tomorrow. Full combat gear. Clifford, Jarl, get moving."

"Yes, sir." Clifford followed Jarl and they went to the command center and signalled for the lander to come down out of orbit. They walked outside and watched the rest of their troop cleaning up.

"It's scary to face your own fear," Jarl said.

"The hardest thing to fight is yourself," Clifford said. Then he laughed. "Goddamn. Instant Sabertooth axioms." The lander came down smoothly and they walked across the grass towards it. "I wonder what Wilde's secret fear really is?"

Jarl shrugged and opened the airlock. "I don't know, but it's got to be something pretty awful to scare that mean bastard."

**T**hey taped the helmets with strips of cut lead shielding, molding the soft metal to the curves neatly, leaving only a single narrow slit for vision. "Suppose there are more than just this one group?" Jarl asked Jarl.

"Then we'll find them... or they will find us. Tape this piece, will you? There, that one is done."

"This is a very nice plan," Erin said. "And it's so pretty."

"Earth wouldn't be so nice either, in some spots, especially during the age of dinosaurs or some of the other times. But it's new. You can look out there and see sky and mountains, instead of another big arid bog or a plain of apartment houses thirty stories deep."

Erin nodded. "I know, but it's hard to sleep. There are so many ways they could attack us, if they wanted. Become big worms or moles or something and come at us from underground, or..."

"Clifford and I were discussing it going up to the Rip," Jarl said, breaking into her agitated speech. "They must be carnivorous. They must appear to their prey as one of some kind or as something they are not afraid of."

"But they spoke to us, they were intelligent and talked..."

"Yes, and that bothers me. We shouldn't go around killing off intelligent species, but when that species is trying to make you into lunch, well, I don't know. We're the invaders here, we're the one disturbing the ecological balance. Perry says we should leave."

"But we came so far," Erin said. "The Earth we knew is no more. We can't go back."

"We can go on, if we wanted," Jarl replied. "If we knew where to go next." He paused and patted Erin's hand. "Right now, if we are going to stay, it's them or us."

Erin nodded wearily. "It just seems as though there ought to be a better way, or another way."

Jarl agreed, but he had nothing else as Jarl.

**T**he arc of caves was before him as Jarl crouched in the underbrush. He could see the movements of Clifford's squad on the cliff-top, then he looked to his left and right, checking the positions of his own command. They had left Jennie Torres behind at the television monitors, sealed up in the dome with Johnny McClain and Bertha Morgan manning the sensors and the weapons. All the rest of the survivors of Wilde's decimated squads were surrounding the cave home of the strange creatures.

"Do you think they can read us?" he heard Corporal Kalinin ask Wilde. "Do you think they know we're here?"

"Quiet on the comm," Wilde said in Jarl's earplug.

"Sergeant Clifford, you ready?"

"Yes, sir."

"Sergeant Jarl, cover me, I'm going out."

"Sergeant, don't you think..."

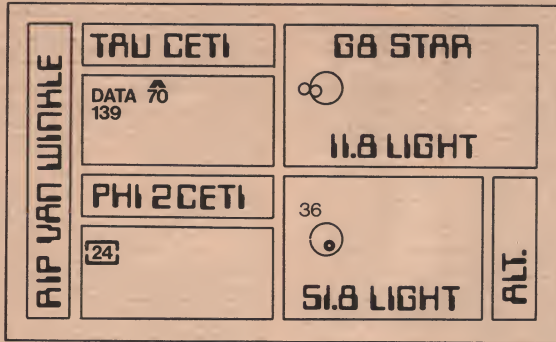
"Quiet on the commline!" Wilde stepped out, his big Magnum laser held at the ready. He took a few steps into the clearing and scanned the cave mouths. "I see some movement in the third from right," he said calmly.

There was a few swift movements deep in the shadows, then the red-robed figure of Christ emerged. He made a peace sign and advanced smiling.

"Greetings. Peace be on you."

Wilde took a few more steps, then halted, his laser leveled, as robed figures emerged from various caves. They were all either smiling faintly or had no expression.

"Whoever you are," Wilde began, "or whatever you are, I think you are the ones that raided our camp



**With suspended animation the stars were finally within man's reach—if only he could find men and women with guts, and skill, enough to go out there and survive.**

and killed my men."

"Thou shalt not kill thy neighbor's wife," Christ said. "Thou shalt not worship strange gods before me. Thou shalt keep holy the honor of thy mother and father."

"Thou shalt shut up and answer my questions," Wilde said. He chimed the command circuit switch and his next words were heard only by the Terrans. "Slap on your slit plates." Everyone reacted quickly and took curved plates of lead from their pockets and put them in place. "Jennie, what do you see?"

"Nothing's changed, sir. The cameras show the same forms."

"Take off the faceplates," Wilde ordered. "They aren't working."

Jarl watched as Wilde took off his entire helmet. The sergeant looked towards the Christ figure belligerently, his knuckles white as he clenched his teeth.

For a long moment the big, dark, burly sergeant glared at the slight, graceful figure of Christ, who smiled back with infinite wisdom. Then the Christ figure's expression changed, became surprised, then startled, then, quickly, fearful.

"No!" Christ said sharply. He turned towards the others, who were also looking nervous, their fingers plucking at their robes. "They—"

Wilde took another step and Christ twitched. A quiver seemed to go from his head to his toe and his features blurred and became indistinct. The apostles grabbed at each other, as if to steady themselves, and scowled at each other. The Christ figure suddenly whirled towards Wilde in the twinkling of an eye. Fangs grew in a distorted white face. The red robe darkened in an instant and became black and reshaped itself into a swirling cape. Long bony fingers reached out towards Wilde and the creature screamed insanely.

Wilde fired, and Jarl fired, and the dark-clad figure twisted, screaming.

The apostles ran, some towards the caves and some at Wilde. One bloated and became a scamping spider, growing quickly, spouting bright red, rising to three meters in three seconds, its insectile face still with the faint imprint of a demented saint. Another dropped to the ground, elongated and slithered, becoming a hissing snake of monstrous size.

Wilde fired into the writhing body of the vampire and then whirled to face the others, firing with swift but cool precision. Jarl's squad joined the shooting, with long ruby rays slicing into spider and snake, into a nightmare creature of tentacles and mouths, into a beautiful young girl with flowing blonde hair and chocolate skin, into a frail, white-haired old woman stumbling among the severed limbs, into a bawling fat baby two meters high, then again and again into the still quivering, still twisting portions of toros and monster heads.

"Cease firing!"

Jarl stopped, breathless. From the cliff-top a red beam still chopped into a protoplasmic blob that had been trying to climb the rocks. Dust fell as the beam cleared dirt and dead flesh.

"Goddamn it, Miller, cease fire!"

The firing stopped and Wilde stood alone in the clearing before the caves. To Jarl's right someone was crying. Shaking, he stepped out of the bushes and stood with burning eyes and dry throat, watching the bits and pieces and half-bodies slowly change. Snake scales and spider skin changed into fragments of bloody gray. The beautiful young girl became a laser-dissected corpse, small and fragile and gray-skinned. The giant disemboweled baby was now a disemboweled gray body, a biped about the size of a large child.

"Jesus H. Christ!" someone said on the commline.

"They tried everything," Clifford said.

"They gave us no choice," Wilde said.

Jarl walked up next to his commander and looked up at him. "What did you do, Sergeant? You said you were going to ask questions, but you took off your helmet and—"

"I wanted them to get my full thoughts, Sergeant Jarl. I figured if they were getting their images from our minds, I'd give them back a few."

"What... what did you do?" Jarl asked, turning away from the lumps of dead meat in the dust.

"Some of my own bad dreams. I sort of suggested that that's what we really were." Wilde grinned down at him. "And maybe we are."

"But we saw them as... all those things," Jarl said, "so they must have been reading our minds or—"

"They retained the memory of what they had been before, I imagine," Sergeant Wilde said, eyesing the staining remnants of once-living flesh. "Maybe, after evolving on this planet, we gave them a whole new set of responses, like putting a chameleon on a vibrachrome panel."

"Do you think they eliminated all the other forms of intelligent life, if there were any?" Erin asked.

"Don't you?" Wilde asked, looking at her. Erin shivered and nodded her head.

Wilde turned away and began bawling out Miller for not paying attention to orders, then at Jarl Iwaniya for endangering his laser with prolonged firing of milliplates.

"Jarl," Erin said quietly, "I don't think I want to stay on this planet. I don't think I'd ever feel safe. Every animal I saw, every tree even... I'd never feel safe."

Jarl nodded. He felt the same way. He looked up at the morning sky. There were a couple of bright stars visible. "Why not?" he said. "It's only a night's sleep away."

"You all feel the same way?" Sergeant Wilde asked the assembled group. They sat or stood around the room where they ate and relaxed, and they were all watching Wilde.

"We just don't feel safe here," Corporal Lai Chong Sung said. "It's been two weeks since... since we killed them and I think we're more nervous now than then. Tiara killed some kind of pretty bird and sliced up a big tree, out of their switch."

"I felt right at me," Tiara said quickly.

"Bertha zapped one of those hoppers," Corporal Lai Chong said. "Petru cut the legs off those deer-like things, and Johnny McClain damn near shot Doornick."

"Well, she can't put on me from behind, quiet-like," Johnny protested.

"All right," Wilde said, stopping the flow of words from the others.

"We don't feel like we're quitting," Jarl said into the silence. "Maybe we shouldn't have been here anyway."

"There have got to be others like those... those... you know," Sharon said.

***Their mission was a simple one. Land on the planet, then survive to start the human race afresh. There were others with different ideas, though.***

"You can't just land anywhere you want, blast yourself out a turf, and say it's yours," Betty Perry said. "How would we feel if someone landed in Agard or New York or in Lai Chong's Tien Shan, and just said they were living there now?"

"All right, settle down," Wilde said. He looked around, then spoke to them slowly. "I know how you feel. Every innocent thing looks suspicious now, including ourselves." He held up three fingers.

"Here are our options. We can stay, fight when we must, keep a good watch. Or we can figure we got them all and relax." He grinned wickedly when everyone protested. "We can go on hunting parties and clean out the whole planet of those shape-changing sponges. Everyone groaned. Wilde held up a fourth finger. "We can go back to sleep and wake up orbiting another sun."

"Yeah! Let's get out of here!" Everyone there in a few choice words before Wilde got them quieted down. "All right, then we go look for another ball of mud to play with. Clifford, bring down the lander in the morning and see the equipment packed. Jarl, give me a breakdown on the nearest stars in the right spectrum and anything the computer has on possibilities of Earth-type planets. Jennie, you are in charge of decontamination. Make sure nothing gets into the Rip. I don't want to wake up as something's lunch."

The mood of the group had changed. There was excitement and a sudden animation replacing the suspicion, nervousness, and outright fear that had gripped them for two weeks.

"We'll lift as soon as the lander is packed," Wilde said. Several people cheered.

Jarl trotted across the clearing and stopped at the little rise. He saw Wilde standing by the marker on the opposite slope. They were all buried there and their names cut into a huge smoothed rock. Line and Catharine Dufao, Horton from Vela-diga, Liz Evans from Fantasia, Grigori and Kristiana from Russia, Fitzgerald and Adamson from California, Mueller from the Black Forest's Starcastle, Rader from Ichikuri, and Benister from Kansas.

"Sergeant!"

Wilde looked up, waved his hand in an abrupt gesture, then smoothed it across the grape marker. Abruptly he started walking down the slope, to where Jarl stood. For a few seconds they also looked at each other. The grass was already beginning to grow in the long rectangles of fresh dirt.

Wilde said, "You keep thinking maybe if you had been thinking clear they wouldn't be down there."

"You had no way of knowing," Jarl said. "No body ever ran across anything like those things before."

Wilde grinned. "It's my job to anticipate." He looked at Jarl with narrowed eyes. "Some day it might be you, so keep your eyes and mind open."

"Yes, sir."

Wilde turned and started walking towards the lander and Jarl had to trot to keep up. The lander lifted smoothly with the last of the men and equipment and forty minutes later it had docked with the Rip Van Winkle.

"Everyone ready for beddie-bye?" Wilde asked, his voice rough.

"Yes, sir," Clifford answered. Almost everyone is into their inert gowns and—

An alarm clanged suddenly in the airlock. Wilde didn't ask for an explanation, he just started running towards the control room. Clifford was a few seconds behind him. Jarl bawled out a curse like a cemetery.

The clamor in the control room was still as Wilde slapped an over-ride. They all stared blankly at a red light blinking on unneeded communication panel.

"Someone wants to talk to us," Jarl said numbly.

Wilde rubbed the back of his head. A faint voice abruptly filled the equipment-filled chamber.

"—reze, repeat this is the Hernandez Cortez, over. Rip Van Winkle, this is the Hernandez Cortez, repeat, this is the Hernandez Cortez, come in, please man."

Wilde sat down at the padded seat, matched up the microphone and spoke. "What's going on? Who the hell are you?"

The voice sounded relaxed. "Captain, this is Lieutenant Rize of the Federation of Earth ship Hernandez Cortez. Hold on a moment, Captain Newman wants to speak to you."

Wilde looked angrily at Jarl and Clifford, but before he could say anything a feminine voice spoke.

"We're glad you are alive," Carol Newman. We were the closest at the time of your ETA and the Federation diverted us. We're in normal space now and on planetary drive. We should be at Tau Ceti Four in, um, two hundred and five hours. We're so glad you made it all right. Everyone will be—"

"Captain, what the goddamn hell is going on? I'm Sergeant Erin Wilde and I've just had a third of my command eaten for food by a bunch of shape-changers on this goddamn planet."

"Sergeant, Sergeant, calm down! It's been so long and I guess we just forgot. About a unit, a hundred and thirty-five years or so after you left we developed the stardrive. We've been out in the stars for over sixty years! We have colonies on more than two hundred planets, landings on more than a thousand!"

Wilde stared at the panel blankly, then his face grew dark and angry. "You let us sleep for two hundred years? You let my people die? You had stardrive and you let a third of my people die?"

"Easy, Sergeant Wilde." A hint of the command voice crept back into Captain Newman's voice. "You don't have all the facts. There was no way for us to find you. We couldn't travel in that space. It's difficult enough finding and coming out at a sun. Finding a sleeper ship that had no response system for our detectors is almost impossible."

Wilde clenched his jaw. His face was still dark with rage. The Captain went on in a more conciliatory tone. "It was decided years ago by—pass Tau Ceti." She laughed almost apologetically. "It was, in a way, too easy, too close. Everyone thought... I mean, the tapes they gave us... well, we thought that if you did make it, you'd... well, you'd feel you found a home for yourselves, did it yourself, you know. We were ordered to observe, to check on things from space. See if you were all right, that sort of thing. But when we came out of space our sensors showed you were firing up, moving, and it was getting real close... well, go somewhere else. We couldn't let you sleep off another trip. We have the whole technology here. We can give you stardrive, and you can go anywhere you want. We're not in a hurry to get you back to the Academy on Gorgon. Yes, here it is. The Federation is making you a gift of the Rip Van Winkle. They have even suggested you try Sector Twelve Twenty-five. The *Gerhardus Mercator*... that's a survey ship that charted that area. It's reported a number of proper stars in that area, and—"

Wilde snapped off the voice. He turned and looked at Jarl and Clifford, then at the faces crowding into the room. His face relaxed and he held up his smallest finger. "That's a five-finger salute."

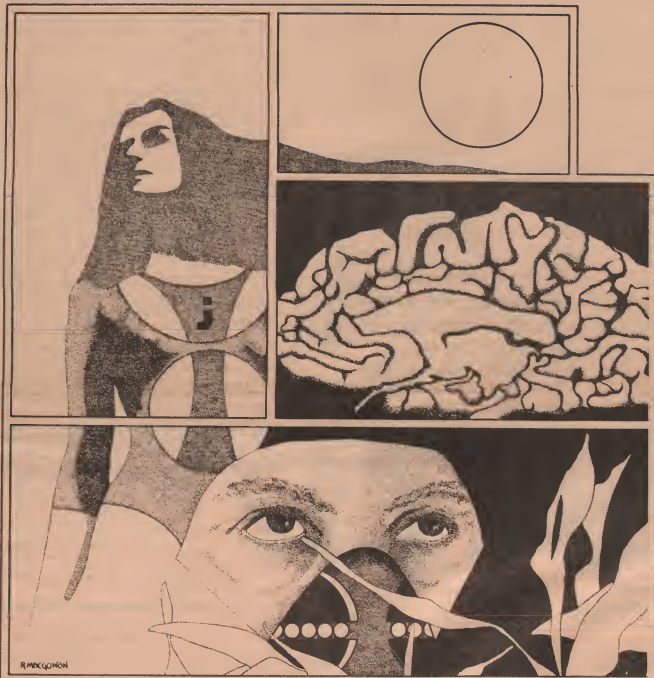
"Yes!" everyone said loudly. ○



Sometimes the world simply isn't what it seems. And at other times, of course, what seems to be the world is nothing more than the ravings of total insanity.

Fiction/Genre VanTroyer  
artist/Alicia Austin

# A Patch of Heaven



sang with happiness that I should be the one she chose to coexist with, for I thought her the embodiment of all my dreams. We took a house down from the shelves, we took a car, we took down all the necessary appliances, we took down velvet feeling furniture. Shop, shop, shop. On and on and on we went, down isles of catalog goods arranged in orderly file, around the other me's with their blue-skinned green-haired ladies, picking our kids and the other paraphernalia of our lives. "Let me feel for you," she said, brushing her lips against my cheek and sliding her hand down my pants. So I gave her my feelings as I inferred that I would not need them, and she felt for me. Walk on, walk on through this paradise of all our dreams come true, walk on, till we reached the check out counter and the time had come to pay.

Let us have your credit plate, please," said the girl behind the counter, a girl with long platinum hair and an angelic-radiant face. So I thought and thought and finally said, "But I have none!" They all looked at me in disbelief. "No credit!" said the girl, and, "No credit!" said my blue-skinned green-haired lady. "What! no credit?" cried the salesperson as he ran from the other side of the department store. "Then give back the things you have taken," he said, "and leave our bounteous land." Distraught, distraught, I cried, "But you have taken my ears and made me deaf! You have taken my eyes and made me blind! You have taken my feelings and made me insensitive! Is that not enough?" And they all shouted in unison, "It is not Legal Tender!" So they gave me back my ears and eyes and feelings, and they said they would not guide me if I could not pay, and threw me through the double plate-glass doors on to the hard, cold concrete of the city's sidewalks. "Take back the things of your past!" they shouted after me. "We cannot use them here!" I stood and brushed my clothes straight, and looked around the streets jammed with traffic. "Welcome to this side of schizophrenia," flashed the sign above the plateglass doors. People scurried by, like shadows in the sooty night, hungering after the plastic window displays and ignoring the world around them. Always ignoring the world around them. I leaned against a lamp post, feeling the narrowness of my escape pounding through me. "It is some one else's schizophrenic fugue!" I shouted. "Live your own existence!" They just marched on. On and on and on and on. Marching through another's existence, marching on, through the unreality of another's reality. I said, "When shall men of reason step forth, and rationality prevail?" and turned to walk away. "When?" said a giant mouse in bright red trunks held up by yellow-buttoned red suspenders, as he tried to hitch a ride from the sidewalk. He waved his white-gloved hands at me and said, "Nevermore." O



Moving on: on and on and on and on, on, on, on, onward, and on, Marching through existence, on and on, through the unreality of reality. Downtown, for instance. All those gray, imposing facades of all those gray, forbidding, brick and stone and concrete and steel and glass buildings thrusting upward into the hazy blue polluted sky. All those people scurrying around. Unreal, if one is in the right frame of mind. Behind those stone and glass faces, lights, colors, tinseled things and plastic things, manic furies designed and constructed to enhance and reinforce the manic furies of some poor, bewildered somebody you or I have never met—unless in the mirror. All lined up in neat, even rows, with neat, carefully lettered price tags stating the cost of existence. Bustle, bustle, bustle, down through the department store corridors of life, credit rating in hand, only just not over-extend too far or they'll come collect you for your arrears. The sign over the plateglass doors said, "Wel-

come to this side of schizophrenia," in shifting patterns of rainbow light. A salesperson came up to me and smiled his charm and debonair to me. He had very large teeth and a very tan face and reeked of polyethylene. "Let us reinforce your identity," he said. So I checked my ears with him as I inferred that I would not need them. Walk on, walk on, into the mainstream of life, walk on, but do not walk too long, they say, lest you become like that stone that rolls over bare.

I met a lady, there, dressed in sequins of green. Her green hair shimmered in the overhead glare of fluorescent rainbow light. Her blue skin held the texture of a dusking night, and her silver lacquered fingernails seemed to be the mirrors of her life. She stood in a booth at the junction of several isles, smiling, smiling, her mirror bright chromium teeth shining out like a beacon at night on a rocky coast. "Infortivra," said the sign that was

hanging over her head. I came up to her and stared in wonder, my heart pounding, pounding my desire. "Let us guide you to wherever you wish to go," she said in a silken modulated voice that flowed in quadraphonic sound. "Tago no ura yu / Uchi dete miraba / Mashu ni zo / Fuji no takane ni / Yuki wa furukeru," I said. "Can you lead me there?" She smiled her dazzling smile and said, "Give up the things of your past, for you have reached the juncture of the future. Live for now and tomorrow. Let us guide you." So I gave her my eyes as I inferred that I would not need them, and I touched the promise of her butyl skin, the asynthetic of psychic words ringing through my head. Walk on, walk on, gripping the malleability of her hand, walk on, as she led me through the hazy light reflected from the manna of the Promised Land.

The blue-skinned lady said to me, "I will live with you forever. We will be secure, just you and I," and my soul

# POTPOURRI



Bruce Day

## COMMON DENOMINATOR

by B. J. Brosse

I am dying. Intense physical discomfort grips my body. The end must be near. Deep mysterious blackness sweeps me to the door of infinity again and again, only to bring me back with a succession of convulsive throbs. I am motionless now. Fully conscious for the first time in hours. Or is it days? It is difficult to distinguish objects, yet I am acutely aware of the shadowy world around me. It is a strange relief to know that I am alive this moment. Yes, this moment is mine. Feverishly, I grope, touch, feel. My skin is cracked and broken. There is no mistake; my time is running out... The exertion leaves me trembling and I hate myself for giving in to the pain. An ominous silence settles and my gloom increases... Must death come slowly? This is intolerable! I am becoming more feeble. My turned-out, swollen body no longer functions and activity is a mere struggle against

the inevitable.

When I was young and full of curiosity, I explored the world with eager passion. Motion was liquid; taken for granted, like eating and breathing. How presumptuous! Do we ever appreciate the fullness of life until it is passing? Do we see the scarlet blossom or the delicately veined leaf? Do we feel the warm yellow of the sun or the cool green of a spring morning? I wonder... I wonder. The throbbing begins, shaking me, the world, the universe! With supreme anguish I sense the advancing blackness and panic swallows my very being. Thrashing wildly, I know the meaning of abandonment. Has another ever suffered such aloneness? HELP ME! I don't want to die... I don't want to die! Oh God, it is no use...

The sun is gone. All is darkness. The windless air brings no relief to my parched body. A distant roll of thunder tells me I am still alive, but now even the will to struggle has nearly ceased. I simply wait. Drifting... dreaming... hoping. Perhaps there is more... perhaps we are too exquisite a part of creation to be obliterated by this monstrosity called death. I want to believe, I must believe,

to keep some semblance of sanity. Fear is my enemy, an impersonal, uncompromising enemy, leaving me silent and motionless. My thoughts are despondingly dull, clarified occasionally by a dim memory or a vague prayer. The invisible is my reality. Death is the predator, always feeding, yet forever hungry. Will he never be filled until all is dust, I wonder sadly?

A sudden thought brings sheer despair. Perhaps THIS is death! An endless voyage to nowhere. NO! NO! I cannot go on forever in this arid land of bleak desolation. It is beyond comprehension... A shudder ripples through my weary body and I do not know if I am glad or sorrowful. Soon all will be darkness again and I will be lost. A prisoner of the deep.

I am half delirious. Once more I have pulled myself from the evil inferno to be tortured by the perpetual fear of the unknown. My courage is gone. Death is inescapable and only the foul smell of my own decaying body is real. I wait in dark silence. I am certain it cannot go on much longer for I am too weak to dream. Even now I can feel myself slipping down into the pit... slowly

gliding... into nothingness. I welcome it... the security... of... of...

It is possible I am awake? I see nothing. Nor do I feel. Yet I hold some secret. A luminous, shining, internal light. What did I so foolishly fear? The physical discomfort? The blackness? Myself? The pain is gone and weariness no longer numbs me. It is accomplished. The silver thread is broken. With sudden, unutterable joy I feel the trembling begin. I embrace it! It is over. Brilliant color surrounds me as I soar to the summit of perfection. It is all so different... yet the same. In one miraculous and wonderful moment I know... I know!

The garden is a murmur of life, a splash of emerald, a dusting of rose and lilac. With unimaginable grace I flutter against a single white flower. My movement is more eloquent than the music of the gentle breeze. I hover above the cocoon from which I emerged amid the feathery foliage; then with a brief aerial touch, I rise to meet the new day.

## THE REALIST

by Samuel Henderson

I dunno why it is, but it seems like after a certain time, all you can get on teevee is these dumb science-fiction movies.

I guess some people like to watch em. Takes their mind off their troubles, I suppose. But me, I like to live in the real world. I mean, shh, who needs all these dumb monster movies, anyway. As if the world wasn't in a bad enough situation like it is.

Yeah, really. I can see why some people would like to forget about it, the way things just seem to keep getting worse and worse all the time. One damn thing after another.

Take today's paper, for instance. Just look at it. Right up at the top, big headlines — GÖZZILLA REAPPEARS IN PHILIPPINES. THOUSANDS FLEE. And down here — GIANT EYE FROM EROUS ADVANCES ON CHICAGO. God, ain't there ever something. They say it wiped out most of Akron.

But this science fiction stuff, now — I just can't see it. It's too far out. I mean, just look at the dumb stuff. Here, gimme the programs.

Yeah. Look at what they got on this week. Adolph Hitler. Adolph Hitler Versus Stalin. Invasion of Viet Nam. Killers from the Desert. The Curse of Richard Nixon.

Shit. I mean, ya gotta be sick to like that kinda stuff.

## Spirit of '76

by Donald Fransson

Ladies and gentlemen, the President of the United States.

My fellow Americans I speak to you this morning on the opening of the Washington Fair, celebrating this year the 300th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, that great document we all guard with our lives, and which we must all honor.

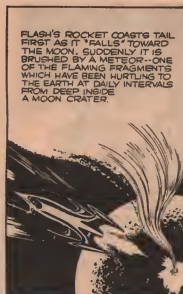
You've read that on the previous centennial, the 200th, it wasn't considered likely that democracy could survive another hundred years in this country. They were wrong, the prophets of doom. Weren't they?

As I gaze out at this assemblage of smiling faces, filling to overflowing the park in front of the White House, I see an equal number of black and white faces. Integration has been maintained. Huh? It?

I'm glad to see you are all in your uniforms. Even though this nation is at peace, it proves you are ready to defend it against all enemies, should they exist anywhere in the world. Be proud of your uniforms. As your Commander in Chief, I am proud of them, of you, and this



"I'M SHUTTING OFF THE ROCKET POWER," FLASH SAYS FINALLY. FREED FROM THE PULL OF GRAVITY, DALE SUDDENLY FINDS HERSELF WEIGHTLESS AND FLOATS LIGHTLY ACROSS THE CABIN, WHILE BRITE STARES AWE-STUCK AT THE EARTH HE HAS LEFT.



FLASH'S ROCKET COASTS TAIL-FIRST AS IT "FALLS" TOWARD THE MOON. SUDDENLY IT IS BRUSHED BY A METEOROID—ONE WHICH HAS BEEN FALLING TO THE EARTH IN DAILY INTERVALS FROM ONE LINE A MOON CRATER.



"THAT CRATER IS OUR TARGET!" FLASH SAYS. "FASTEN STRAPS FOR LANDING." HE PICKS THE BRASS ROCKETS TO KICK THEIR BRASS ROCKETS TOUCHING THE MOON'S ROCKY, AIRLESS SURFACE.



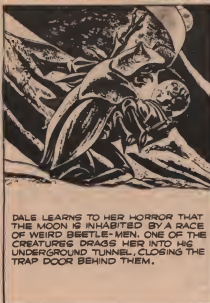
THE ROCKET EXHAUST MELTS A PLATFORM ON THE MOON'S JAGGED SURFACE. BREATHING ARTIFICIAL AIR IN THEIR NOSES, DALES, FLASH, DALE AND BROCK BRITTE CLIMB OUT OF THE AIRLOCK AND SET FOOT ON THE MOON!



ENCOUNTERS ONLY SLIGHT GRAVITY FORCE, THEY BOUND ACROSS THE CRATER'S PUMICE FLOOR. ATOMIC BLASTS BELOW THE MOON'S CRUST MUST BE SHOOTING OUT THE METEORIDS. BRITTE PHONES, "NOTHING CAN LIVE HERE, WITH BURNING DAY, FREEZING NIGHTS, NO AIR OR WATER."



BUT LIVING, INTELLIGENT, SINISTER CREATURES ARE WATCHING THEM, AS DALES, FLASH AND BROCK, ADMIRING THE MOON'S WEIRD BEAUTY, A BEETLE-MAN SPRINGS FROM HIS UNDERGROUND LAIR AND SEIZES HIM.



DALES LEARNS TO HER HORROR THAT THE MOON IS INHABITED BY A RACE OF WEIRD BEETLE-MEN. ONE OF THE CREATURES DRAGS HER INTO HIS UNDERGROUND TUNNEL, CLOSING THE TRAP DOOR BEHIND THEM.



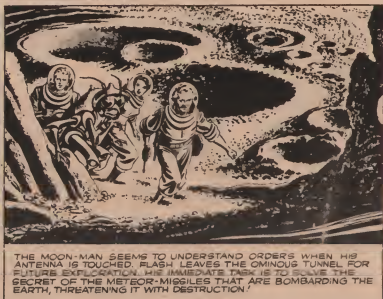
HEARING DALES' TERRIFIED CRY FOR HELP, FLASH LEAPS ACROSS THE CRATER FLOOR WITH TWENTY-FOOT STRIDES AND CATCHES THE HEAVY ROCK DOOR JUST BEFORE IT CLOSES.



THE BEETLE-MAN FRANTICALLY TRIES TO OPEN AN INNER DOOR LEADING INTO THE MOON'S INTERIOR. FLASH DASHES NOT SHOOT HIM FOR FEAR OF HITTING DALES, BUT HE FIRES A WARNING RAY-BLAST AGAINST THE WALL.



SUDDENLY THE BEETLE-MAN RELEASED DALES. FLASH, SHE WHISPERS, "I THINK HE WANTS TO HAVE FRIENDS. HAVEN'T YOU ANTENNA BRUSHED ANYONE? I SEEMED TO GET A TELEGRAPHIC MESSAGE. I BELIEVE HE'S GRATEFUL BECAUSE YOU DIDN'T SHOOT HIM."



THE MOON-MAN SEEMS TO UNDERSTAND ORDERS WHEN HIS ANTENNA IS TOUCHED. FLASH LEAVES THE OMINOUS TUNNEL FOR FUTURE EXPLORATION. HE IMMEDIATELY TRIES TO LEAVE THE SECRET OF THE METEOROID'S THAT ARE BOMBARDING THE EARTH, THREATENING IT WITH DESTRUCTION!

## NEIL'S UNIVERSE

from page 21

We will assume that all telescopes are decently made. In fact, if you buy from a reputable manufacturer, this is usually the case. Optical quality being equal, you can see more with a six inch than a four inch.

If you're interested, the light gathering power of a telescope theoretically increases proportionally to the square of the aperture diameter. Therefore, a two inch objective has four times the light gathering power of a one inch.

In order to best enjoy the hobby and see what there is to see, an aperture larger than three inches should be selected. If you are interested in seeing truly deep sky objects such as nebulae, galaxies, the outer planets, then you will need more aperture. An eight inch, or even larger, would be ideal. But an eight inch reflector can cost from six hundred to well over a thousand dollars.

A six inch is a good compromise. If the optics are good it will enable you to see many deep sky objects as well as bringing the moon into your backyard and showing you the giants Saturn and Jupiter in all of their eerie splendor.

A six inch scope (reflector) will cost from two hundred to more than five hundred dollars, depending on accessories and the manufacturer. A perfectly acceptable, usable and enjoyable instrument can be had for not much over the lower limit of two hundred.

A compromise with cost is to purchase a four and a quarter inch reflector. It too will enable you to see the moon close up, to view all but the faintest of Saturn's rings, to look at the banded atmosphere of Jupiter, to do much of what you could do with the six inch.

Both the six and four inch scopes will enable you to observe double stars, variable stars and literally dozens of celestial objects.

Look over the many choices within the six-inch range. Then examine a few of the smaller scopes. If you can afford the six, it's a good buy. The smaller four can also be a good investment.

Whatever scope you buy, remember that consumerism is no longer a nasty word. Make certain you can use it for a week or so, and return it if it does not meet your requirements. Most dealers and manufacturers offer this option.

### WHAT KIND OF MOUNT?

To my mind there is only one kind of mount a new amateur should consider purchasing, and that is the equatorial mount. All of the prices I have quoted for telescopes include equatorial mounts.

The alt-a-zimuth mount has its proponents. I am not one of them. If you buy a scope mounted on one, you will be severely limiting that scope's capabilities.

An equatorial mount is designed so that, with very little effort, and sometimes automatically, you may track an observed star as it seems to move across the heavens. It is much more difficult to do this with an alt-a-zimuth.

Your first night's observing will tell you what an advantage this can be, as you are able to effortlessly keep the object you are observing within the scope's field of view.

Taking photographs through your telescope is an enjoyable aspect of the hobby that many amateurs get into after a while. You must have an equatorial mount or it is almost impossible to take photos of any celestial object other than the Moon.

But the biggest advantage of the equatorial mount is setting circles. Using these and a Star Atlas, an observer can find objects so faint that they cannot be spotted at all with the naked eye.

How to set up your equatorial mount, and how to use setting circles will be the

turn to page 30



# SCREEN GAME, from page 25

The intrinsic problem with such films seems to be that the focus is the disaster itself—to the detriment of any attempt to portray the affected human characters. The players end up being cardboard cut-outs, totally two-dimensional and indistinguishable save for labels stencilled across their foreheads: The Bitchy Wife, The Conscientious Architect, The Fearless Pilot, The Brave Black Athlete.

Thus the real star is the disaster, and that's why I went to these turkeys. I love special effects. I have the childlike desire to be amazed, to be overwhelmed with sheer sensation. In its way, each of these films does that.

In *Airport 1975*, it's the terrific aerial photography when a pilot is lowered by tether from a jet helicopter to the crippled 747. This is done at about 180 mph, at 9,000 feet. And it was real—that was the grabber. No models, no matte, no fakery. Stuntman Joe Canutt actually dangled between the speeding aircraft. It was only unfortunate that I had to sit through the rest of the film (Helen Reddy as a singing nun?) to view this sequence.

*Earthquake*'s one redeeming feature is the gimmickry of "Sensurround," twin banks of enormous low-frequency speakers that switch on and broadcast viscera-quivering vibrations through the audience during the on-screen quake sequences. The sensation is much like standing on the edge of a subway platform while an express roars past. It's one of those novel experiences you can use as a gambit when the conversation lapses at a slow party. Despite the picture's special Oscar for special effects, the on-screen goodies (a lot of shaking the camera up and down to simulate tremors) aren't always convincing. But then that's what the Sensurround compensates for.

The best of this lot is *Towering Inferno*. (Though perhaps I'm a little biased professionally, because half the script is based on *The Glass Inferno* by Frank Robinson and Tom Scortia, two SF writers who made considerable money from this.) Maybe it's just that I'm getting jaded, but it's rare any more to see a picture which qualifies for the adjective "spectacular." It is spectacular, in all the grand Hollywood traditions. It's got a broad Technicolor canvas: a 135-foot skyscraper in downtown San Francisco catches fire at its christening with hundreds of V.I.P.s trapped upstairs in the penthouse. It's got superstars: Newman, McQueen, Dunaway. It's got all the glossy, sanitized, cinematic action, danger, violence, and grisly death you could want.

So what if the characters continually mouth banalities? The flames rare are purty.

Good taste dictates I refrain from observing that the spate of disaster films has spawned an entire sub-genre of humor: the Shake 'N Bake joke.

## SHORT TAKES

These are still the ones most worth seeing:

*A Boy and His Dog*  
*The Last Days of Man on Earth*  
Flesh Gordon  
Young Frankenstein  
Dark Star  
The Stepford Wives

But if someone tries to talk you into seeing *Chosen Survivors*, retaliolate by offering them a pass to see twelve consecutive showings of *Zardoz*. Without popcorn. O

## NEW FEATURE

Flash Gordon, the most famous SF comic strip, will now be a regular monthly feature in Vertex. Watch for it!



WITH A CAPTIVE BEETLEMAN FLASH EXPLORES THE MOON CRATER FROM WHICH ARE LAUNCHED THE METEORS THAT HAVE BEEN BOMBARDING THE EARTH. "OUR MOONMEN WANT TO HURRY, GALE SAYS. I THINK HE'S AFRAID IT'S TIME FOR ANOTHER METEOR."



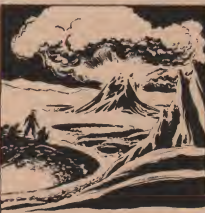
A HOLLOW TUBE LIKE A GIANT CANNON IS SUNK IN THE MOON'S CRUST. IN IT A CREW OF BEETLE MEN IS READYING THE SHOT. "HAY! FLASH SAYS. IT LOOKS AS IF THEY USE AN ATOM BLAST FROM THE BOTTOM OF THE TUBE POSSIBLY WITH BOOSTER SHOTS TO HELP IT PICK UP SPEED."



THE WORKERS VANISH, BLOCKING THEIR TUNNELS BEHIND THEM. THE CAPTIVE MOONMAN HURLS FLASH AND THEY SCRAMBLE TO SHELTER—JUST AS A SERIES OF TERRIFIC EXPLOSIONS HURLS A METEOR TOWARD EARTH.



FLASH AND PROBE BRITE FETCH ATOM WARHEADS FROM THEIR ROCKET SHIP. "WELL, SAVE THEM THE SPACE CANNON," FLASH TELLS DALE. "I'LL GO BY THE EARTH A BREATHING SHIELD, UNTIL WE CAN MAKE SURE THE MOONMEN WON'T BUILD ANOTHER TUBE."



FLASH TOUCHED OFF A SERIES OF TREMENDOUS ATOM BLASTS THAT FILL THE LAUNCHING CRATER WITH RADIOACTIVE FUMBLE. "STAY UNDER COVER," FLASH WARNS. "THOSE EXPLOSIONS WILL DRIVE THE BEETLE MEN OUT OF THE CRATER LIKE ANGRY ANTS."

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FLASH AND HIS PARTY WATCH IN AWE AS THEIR ATOM BLAST WRECKS THE CANNON FROM WHICH FLAMING METEORS WERE HURTLING FROM THE MOON TO THE EARTH. BEETLELIKE MOONMEN POUR ANGRILY OUT OF THEIR BURROWS TO FIND OUT WHAT HAS HAPPENED.



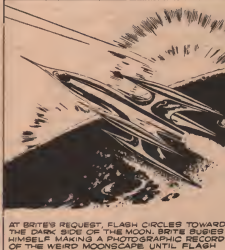
AS THE BEETLE MEN SWARM TOWARD THE SPACE ROCKET, FLASH FIRES HIS CAPTIVE MOONMAN AND ORDERS HIM TO KEEP HIS PEOPLE AWAY FROM THE SHIP. A WARNING RAY-BLAST EMPHASIZES FLASH'S COMMAND.



"HIS CAPT HOLD THEM OFF VERY LONG," FLASH TELLS DALE. "I'LL GO BY THE EARTH A BREATHING SHIELD, UNTIL WE CAN MAKE SURE THE MOONMEN WON'T BUILD ANOTHER TUBE."



THE BEETLE MEN DANCE IN TRIUMPH AS THE ROCKET ROARS AWAY IN THE TUNNEL ENTRANCE. A MYSTERIOUS FIGURE SEEMS GRIMLY CONCERNED.



AT BRITE'S REQUEST, FLASH CIRCLES TOWARD THE DARK SIDE OF THE MOON. BRITE BUYS HIMSELF MAKING A PHOTOGRAPHIC RECORD OF THE WEIRD MOONSCAPE. UNTIL, FLASH WARNS: "HOLD YOUR BREATHS INTO MY ARMS. BUTTER FLY BACK TO KEEP AN EYE ON OUR PLANETES."

NEXT

-MAN IN THE MOON

5-6

They won't find me here.

No, not them. They probably won't even come looking in a place like this. Offend their sensitivities, that's what it'd do. They'd probably curl up at the wingtips just thinking about it.

Christ, it's dark. And wet. I'm gonna catch one hell of a cold if I stay here, that's for sure. Those pipes must be leaking. The water's soaked through my pants already. I can feel it around my knees. It's probably dirty, too, crawling with scum and everything. Damn them!

But at least they won't find me. It might not be so bad if it wasn't so goddam dark. I can't hardly see my hand in front of my face. Can't even tell what time it is. God, I wish it was morning already. Then maybe I'd be able to leave this miserable hole.

Who'm I kidding? They'll never let me leave. They'll start looking as soon as it gets light, on my trail as if I was some goddamn kind of animal or something. Me, an animal! At least I've got two good arms and stand on two good legs, like a man. I can walk around instead of having to fly on any-fairy wings, and I can talk with my mouth instead of my mind, like some dumb mute.

"Angels" they call them! Hah! What idiot TV commentator named them that, I wonder? God sure as hell wouldn't let bugs like them into Heaven. Those people who say they're pretty, they must have rocks in their heads. Ugly leather wings that swish, too big to even get through a normal-sized door. No legs at all, unless you want to call those puny little things hanging down "legs," but that's really stretching it. Claws instead of hands...

Damn! Now my leg's gone to sleep. I wish this place wasn't so goddam small. A guy doesn't even have room to stretch out. You'd think, a big city like this, there'd be plenty of places to hide, lots of small, dark corners to crawl into. Hah! Just try and find one. The whole goddamn place is lit up. It's all their fault, them and their "plasma power." You can light a city now cheaper than you used to be able to light a house. I just wish I could figure out what their angle is. Maybe they want it all lit up so there won't be any place to hide when they take over.

Oh sure, they haven't taken anything over for themselves-yet. Just ask anybody. But they've got us like their slaves, just the same. All these so-called "angels" have to do is ask for something and we give it to them. Just like that. And they give us little "presents" in exchange. "Technological assistance to a less developed society," they say. Trinkets to the natives, that's more like it. Oh, they're setting us up for something. I can see that. Playing us for suckers. I don't know exactly what their game is, yet, but I know they're after something. When's the last time you ever saw anybody give something away?

They're sucking us dry, all right, like mosquitoes. They even look like mosquitoes. And what do we do? Instead of

fighting like men, we sit up and beg like little dogs. All because a bunch of pinko eggheads say these "angels" are a more advanced culture.

Oh! Damn it, now there's a kink in my leg. Better massage it a bit. There, that's a little better. If only it wasn't so fuckin' cold... a guy could freeze his balls off, sitting here.

Of course, they don't have balls. Oh no; they lay eggs, all nice and neat like. No mess, no bother. And they're so goddamn polite it's scary. They'll let you stand on their wingtip for an hour, rather than offend you by asking you to move. Bah! Why don't they act normal and push people around? If I had their power, you wouldn't catch me apologizing to nobody.

But that's their secret, I guess. Can everyone into thinking they're harmless, then pounce when we least expect it. Sure, they're sneaky bastards, all right. But they're not fooling me.

Christ, how much longer is this night

going to last, anyway? Seems like two, maybe three hours since I crawled in here, and that was at three o'clock. And what'll I do when the day comes? They'll be out looking for me by then. Probably have a lot of sell-out human traitors with them, too.

He shouldn't have touched me like that. God, they feel just like bugs! Why couldn't they just leave me alone? But they're all over the place, now. You can't go anywhere without seeing them.

I wonder if they've started looking for me yet. Something like that can't go undiscovered long, and what with them being able to read minds...

Maybe they won't even bother to look. No, that's ridiculous. Not after what I did. They'll look, all right. They'll turn the whole world upside-down if they have to. They can't let a mere Earthman get away with something like that. They'll look.

But they won't find me. Not here. I hope.



# XENOPHOBE

*They thought love was  
the most powerful  
force in the universe.  
But they weren't  
prepared—couldn't have  
possibly been  
prepared—for the  
more powerful force  
the Earthman was going  
to use against them.*



fiction/STEVEN GOLDIN  
artist/MONTE ROGERS

What's that sound? Goddamn, will you look at the size of that! I didn't know rats grew that big. Get the hell away from me, you furry bastard. Damn it, I hate this hole. It's all their fault I'm here. Why in hell can't they just pack up in their ships and go back to Arcturus? We were doing all right for ourselves before they came. Made it to the Moon ourselves. I don't see any reason why we need their help now. Give us a couple of years, and we could have invented their star drive on our own. We're better than they are. They just got a few years' head start, is all.

Now they're pushing this peace crap at us, like a bunch of hippies. We've got to throw away all our bombs—"for our own good." What in hell do they want us to do, have tea parties with the commies? Hey, maybe they're in with the Chinese. Sure, I wouldn't put it past them. Give us all these things free, soften us up, weaken our defenses, then let the Reds move in and take over. It's a sweet set-up all right. And we're falling for it, hook, line and sinker. Damn! Why doesn't somebody stop their tricks? If only I could get out of here, maybe I could tell people. . .

I was not frightened.  
What was that?  
We have no desire to harm you.  
Christ, it's one of them! Get out of my head, you sneaky bastard!  
Please, have no fear.  
Where are you? God damn it, at least come out where I can see your fuckin' hide!

I am in the building above you. Please come out.  
Oh sure. And walk right into your nets, huh? No soap, Charlie. I don't surrender

like them other cowards. You're going to have to come in and get me.

Very well.  
God, here he comes! That stench of them is awful. How did you find me, anyway?

Your thought-emanations are very powerful. You broadcast strongly over quite a large area.

Okay, okay. What are you going to do with me, now that you've caught me? Nothing. No retribution is planned. What do you mean? I killed one of your friends, didn't I?

Yes, but you are not to blame.  
Not to blame? What do you mean? I hit him, didn't I? All he did was walk up to me and tap me on the shoulder. But I can't take it, you know what I mean? And how was I to know he was so fragile? Can't you creepy bugs get it through your skulls that I don't want you around me? Can't you just leave me alone?

But that is why you are not to blame. You have an almost instinctive aversion to our race, which any member of our telepathic species should have detected immediately. My compatriot's touching you was an impropriety and a gross error, for which he paid with his life.

Oh yeah? Well, if you don't want to punish me, why did you come chasing me down here?

Due to my compatriot's error, you have been made to suffer great anguish, and were forced by your fear of retribution to hide away in a very unsuitable environment. On behalf of my race, I would like to apologize.

DAMN YOU! You bugs are driving me nuts! I hate the sight of you! Who in hell gave you the right to apologize to me?

Please stop this outburst, I beg you. Who in hell ever told you you were so superior to us? You look down your noses at us and try to be nice to the animals. We're just your little pets, aren't we, doing nice little tricks to keep you amused.

No, we genuinely want contact with all intelligences. . .

Throw the monkey a peanut and watch him perform. That's what you think of us, isn't it? I hate all you goddamn fairy bastards! Why don't you leave us alone! Please, your emanations are too powerful. . .

I hate you! Do you understand? I HATE YOU!!!!  
HATE!

My God, it worked! The bastard just withered up and died. Sweet Jesus! Hate! That's the answer. That's the one thing those sensitive little goody-goodies can't take. Hate 'em hard enough, and they curl up and keel over.  
Okay, if that's the way to fight 'em, then I'm gonna do it. Watch out, you bug-eyed bastards—I'm coming after you, armed and ready! O



# NORMAN SPINRAD

from page 9

didn't identify with it at all. I mean, by the time I finished the thing, I really loathed it. And I didn't identify too much with Homer Whipple either, like it says on your notes there.  
VERTEX: Ah, you didn't? Why not?  
SPINRAD: In a world where Nazi Germany didn't happen, it would seem like the most ludicrous science fiction. The things which are most ludicrous to Whipple are the things which are real in our world. So there he is, writing this afterward, a puzzle piece, wondering what the hell is this book, and how anyone can take it seriously.  
VERTEX: But the book is so strange that it seems to me that some inner part of the writer, and of the reader, wants to identify with Feris Jagger, to be able to do anything he wants.

SPINRAD: All right, there are many levels in that book, and I'm not sure that I understand them all. What that book was supposed to do was to get you into that Lin Carter sword-and-sorcery stuff, to give you the same kind of phallic identification with Feris Jagger that you get with Elric and Conan. Then about half-way through you begin to realize what you've been getting off on. It gets worse and worse and more horrible, and by the time you get out on the other end, it's like a deconditioning process in words. You find that you identified with Nazi Germany. In a way, that's what you're really doing when you read a Conan book. The values are the same. The psychological mechanisms.

VERTEX: You mean the fact that Conan, a barbarian tooling around civilization, is able to defeat anything simply because he is a barbarian.  
SPINRAD: Chopping people to pieces in the meantime. Ideally, sure, I want you to identify with Hitler up to a point. And that point depends on how far gone you are. I've seen reviews of the thing where people loved it, but complained about the extraneous matter around the novel that Hitler wrote. It was a perfectly straight novel which should have been left alone.

VERTEX: I guess they particularly liked the part at the end where everybody was cloned.  
SPINRAD: Where they fucked the stars. I guess if people didn't realize by then what was going on, they're hopeless. That was what was so scary about it; some people just got off on it. They didn't see what they were eating. Or if they did, they liked it.

VERTEX: What do you think will be the major direction of sf in the '70s?  
SPINRAD: Right now I see two directions. A majority of science fiction is going back to what it was in the fifties: commercial, conventional, adolescent. On the other hand, a lot of writers will publish work which is science fiction in literary terms, but which will not be packaged with the sf label, a rocket ship, and green slime. Tom Disch is publishing a book like that for Knopf. Chip Delany did something like this, but it's ended up being published by Bantam with Fred Pohl's name on it as a "Fred Pohl Selection." That's another horrible trend toward commercialization! Publishers are making deals with names like Fred Pohl so they will have name editors to sell their books! I think it's an affront to the writers and it's dishonest to the readers. I don't care how much money anybody would offer, nobody would get a novel of mine with the editor's name on the front cover, ever! I think it's an appalling trend.


VERTEX: What directions do you see yourself headed for as a writer?  
SPINRAD: I've thought about it a lot. My goal for a long time, as far as fiction is concerned, has been to reach the point where I don't have to think at all, "Is this science fiction?" So that I can just sit down and write a short story or novel and have it published properly. I have a mainstream novel—*Passing Through the Flame*—coming out from Putnam in September. Where I go from there in terms of novels, I'm not sure. I think I'll always write some science fiction, though, especially short stories. I've always thought of myself as a writer who writes some science fiction, not a "science fiction writer." And I think my science fiction benefits from the other stuff. And vice versa. I guess I'm either trying to be a Renaissance Man or a hopeless dilettante.

VERTEX: Thank you, Mr. Spinrad. O

*"A majority of science fiction is going back to what it was in the fifties: commercial, conventional and adolescent."*



article/L. G. BLACKBURN



# THE BIG PLANETS

Man will, in 1977, be receiving signals from twin spacecraft  
out in the cold dark reaches of the solar system, visiting the first two gas  
giant planets, Jupiter and Saturn.

The Mariner Jupiter/Saturn mission in 1977 will undertake a hopefully comprehensive exploration from space of the Jupiter and Saturn systems in a four-year flight to sweep past both planets with two large, fully instrumented spacecraft. The first two gas giant planets, with their 22 satellites and the myriad particles of Saturn's rings, are radically different in composition, form and other properties from the ball-of-rock inner planets.

The two Mariner spacecraft will be launched aboard Titan/Centaur boosters from Cape Kennedy during a 30-day period in August and September of 1977. They will swing by Jupiter about a month apart in early 1979. From Jupiter they will get gravity-assist acceleration, sending them out to Saturn, which they will reach in mid-1981. Close passes by some of the moons of each planet are planned.

Prime research questions about the gas giants have to do with the composition and dynamics of their atmospheres, which include the colored cloud bands and Jupiter's Red Spot. Other areas of interest to be probed are the magnetic fields, ionospheres and aurora, planetary energy balance and possible interior structures of these huge, low density bodies.

Questions about the satellites revolve around the composition and possession

of atmospheres of the larger moons, and the possible asteroid origins of the smaller satellites. Saturn's rings, believed to be a vast flat formation of separate particles and bodies of ice in orbit, pose special questions for the planetary scientist.

The Mariner spacecraft will carry medium and high resolution television cameras with multicolored filters; spectrometers and photometric instruments for atmosphere analysis; and sensors for measuring fields and charged particles near the planets and in interplanetary, interstellar space.

Both spacecraft will be occulted behind Jupiter and Saturn, permitting radio probing of their atmospheres. Similar occultations are planned with as many satellites as possible. About ten satellites will be mapped and photographed, as well as the planets themselves. Investigators plan to observe atmospheric motions and developments at Jupiter and Saturn for periods of several weeks.

After leaving Saturn, the two Mariner spacecraft will slowly recede from the Sun, eventually leaving the solar system entirely.

The 1600-pound Mariner spacecraft design is fully attitude-stabilized, locking onto the Sun and the star Canopus, and pointing its 12-foot diameter

antenna at the Earth by means of miniature hydrazine rocket engines. It draws electric power from three plutonium-fueled, thermo-electric generators, because solar panels are not practical at Saturn's distance from the Sun, ten times as far as Earth.

The spacecraft will be able to send TV pictures to Earth from Jupiter as fast as they are taken, using a new high frequency, higher power radio system, beaming to one of three 210-foot Deep Space Network antennas, located in California, Australia and Spain.

Very precise navigation and course corrections are required for the Mariner spacecraft to use the planetary swing-by maneuver at Jupiter to propel them on to Saturn. This maneuver was first demonstrated by Mariner 10 at Venus en route to Mercury last year.

The gravity assist trajectory change, which Mariner 10 used for the first time, is the result of more than twenty years of speculation, scientific research and engineering development. The technique may be used to change direction and speed, saving both fuel and time in interplanetary missions.

The concept first appeared in the literature in 1952, when Arthur C. Clarke discussed a gravity-assist at Jupiter for

a Saturn mission in *Sands of Mars*.

Technical discussion of the concept first appeared in the *Journal of the British Interplanetary Society* in the early 1950s, where many early theories were developed and later realized in space missions. In those days the perturbation of a spaceship's flight path by passage close to a planet was regarded by most investigators as a computational nuisance, but Derek F. Lawden, in the *Journal's* November 1954 issue, suggested the use of such perturbation maneuvers to save on fuel in interplanetary flight.

In the next few years the concept was utilized mainly in studies of round-trip flights in which the spacecraft leaves the Earth, flies by another planet or two, and returns to Earth, several investigators using the concept to achieve the Earth return. One of them, G. A. Crocco, suggested the analogy of the banked turns of an "invisible motor car raceway".

The first systematic development of the gravity-assist technique was performed at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in the early 1960s by Michael A. Minovitch, then a UCLA mathematics graduate student and part-time JPL trajectory engineer, under the direction of JPL's Victor C. Clarke, Jr. Previously multiple planet trajectories had been sought by poring over prepared listings of parts of a flight



path—e.g., the Earth-Venus and Venus-Earth components—and matching them in velocities and time. Clarke had discovered an Earth-Venus-Earth round trip by this method.

Minovitch however, developed a mathematical technique for searching out gravity-assist trajectories. He programmed equations on a digital computer and obtained a number of promising gravity-assist opportunities. At Clarke's suggestion he concentrated on multi-planet trajectories, and soon discovered the existence of Earth-Venus-Mercury trajectories for 1970 and 1973, such as used by Mariner 10.

Having observed that the gravity-assist trajectory was extremely sensitive to error in aiming the spacecraft toward the planets, Minovitch believed

reaching planets beyond Mars and Venus.

At about the same time two JPL trajectory engineers began studying the Earth-Venus-Mercury opportunity. Francis M. Sturms and Elliott Cutting analyzed the navigation requirements and found that there were no barriers in contemporary guidance technology to a multi-planet mission. They prepared detailed plans and navigation strategy for the 1970 opportunity and concluded that it was practically feasible as a space mission. The two published their results in 1965, attracting considerable interest from scientists and aerospace engineers.

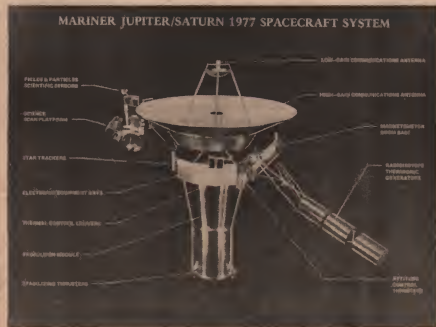
Flights to outer planets via Jupiter were studied at JPL by trajectory engineer Gary A. Flandro in 1965. Aiming for a reduction in flight time, rather than simple fuel economy, Flandro identified

JPL navigation engineer Louis Kingland studied the mission feasibility of these opportunities and Homer J. Stewart, Caltech scientist, addressing the outer planet missions in a 1966 article in *Astronautics & Aeronautics* declared that gravity-assist had become a practical engineering concept. The Outer Planets Grand Tour did not, in fact, become a project, due to budgetary difficulties. But a similar opportunity will be realized by the Mariner-Jupiter-Saturn 1977 Project now under development.

Meanwhile, Sturms had determined the navigation and mission feasibility of the 1973 Earth-Venus-Mercury opportunity, and JPL engineering teams began a two-year series of studies of possible 1973 Venus Missions which culminated in NASA's authorizing the Mariner-

Venus-Mercury 1973 Project in January 1970.

In early 1970 Giuseppe Colombo of the Institute of Applied Mechanics in Padua, Italy, noted that in the 1973 Earth-Venus-Mercury Mission the period of the spacecraft orbit, after leaving Mercury, is very close to twice the period of Mercury itself, and suggested the possibility of a second encounter of Mercury. Further analysis showed that by careful choice of the fly-by point at Mercury, it was possible to make a gravity-tum that would return the spacecraft to Mercury six months later. A bonus on the mission which was completely successful. With luck, the Jupiter-Saturn mission will be equally successful, giving us a close up of the two biggest planets in our system. **O**



that a new kind of guidance would be necessary before the Maxwell could be successfully used.

In May, 1964, Arthur H. Hunter of the National Aeronautics & Space Council, writing in *Astronautics & Aeronautics*, urged that we accelerate and expand the unmanned exploration of the solar system. He included the gravity-assist trajectory as an economical way of

missions to each of the outer planets, based on fly-bys of Jupiter in the late 1970's. The fly-by method shortened the mission times by one-half or more. A highlight of Flandro's work was a nine-year gravity-assist trajectory, starting in 1978 and flying by each of the major outer planets—Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus and Neptune. Flandro dubbed this trajectory the Planetary Grand Tour.

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## BRAIN TERMINAL

from page 16

forever. Do you now understand?"

"Yes," said Oregon, but—"

"Do the rest of you understand?" With varying degrees of comprehension, they all nodded. "Then," continued Terminex, "I think we ought to begin."

"Agreed," said Oregon.

"The first one from among you shall be he who is artificial."

Cafter stepped forward, his face dour. "What—" he started to say. Then his face contorted, his eyes closing. He staggered backward and his knees began to buckle.

"Torre," said Oregon, "what is it he sees?"

Her face was whiter than its usual pallor. "He sees others, exactly like himself. Duplicates. They swarm over him, but he fights. They cover him with their bodies, but he thrusts them aside—"

Cafter cried out and crumbled to the floor. Tourmaline knelt at his side and fumbled with a wrist. "Is he dead?" said Oregon.

"I don't know. How do you tell with a simulacrum?" "Jade Blue," said Terminex.

The catmother crouched close to the floor and marled defiantly. After a moment the glow trailed off. Oregon looked questioningly at Torre.

"She is fighting for her kittens."

The catmother lurched and slowly rolled onto her side. She lay still. "Jade Blue!" Tourmaline cried.

"Torre," Terminex said.

"Wait," Oregon said. "Is this going too fast?" Torre too crumpled; but before she struck the floor she vanished with a pop of displaced air.

"Tourmaline Hayes," said the computer inexorably. Tourmaline looked momentarily at Oregon, then resolutely faced the primal metal egg that was Terminex. After a few seconds she collapsed upon the floor of the chamber. Oregon stared down at the litter of bodies, his fists white-knuckled.

"Is something the matter, Tinnath?" said the computer. "Is all this progressing too rapidly for your vaulted intellectual prowess to digest?"

Without thinking, Oregon launched himself at the metal ovoid. As his fingers closed about the slick surface of the computer, it occurred to him that he was not yet being stopped by Terminex. No force field, no enchantments, no tractor beams, no defenses at all were in evidence. And then with a burst of hysterical strength he hurled the computer from him; in a perfect trajectory, Terminex hurtled toward him.

To Oregon's eye, the ovoid appeared to fall slower and slower as it approached the ebon lightness of the anomaly. Oregon blinked; the metal egg blurred and grew fainter. Then he was rocked back, staggered, felt his back press against the metal wall as a voice spoke in his brain,

Are you again wondering if I am performing irrationally?

Terminex? What—is happening?

For one compressed portion of a moment, you and I have a last opportunity to converse. What about the others? What did you do to them? Nothing. They are fine; even Torre. They don't look fine.

I realize you may have your doubts, but trust me. Then the test—We passed?

It was a sham. If there were indeed a test, it was met when all of you decided to journey here.

Then why the charade?

To give you each an opportunity to reconsider your motives for breaking out of Cinnabar's eternal but stagnant patterns. I was curious to know your respective over-riding considerations when pressed into this final confrontation. You may be interested to know that in none of your minds was the city's salvation any sort of direct factor. It was as I had suspected.

What will happen to Cinnabar?

You all will have to get along on your own; the city can no longer care for you. I exaggerated the severity but not the existence of the functional senility damaging me. The time dilations/contraction effects' infinite small impositions on my systemic synchronicity are cumulative. I cannot solve this problem other than by fight.

But—

The inhabitants, can they survive—

They survived before I existed; certain ones will continue to do so. The city will continue, even if the populace numbers as few as four.

But—

My decision is firm; my action, irrevocable.

The anomaly—what will happen to you?

I suspect I can enter the other universe only as a collection of subnuclear particles, randomly distributed.

Then you'll die?

Not necessarily. Like certain other organisms, machine-like particles possess a quality you might best compare to ingrained somatic memory. It is possible that in the other universe I will compose a primal seed of matter and energy. Altered somewhat, I may survive. In a computer universe . . .

It is conceivable.

I wish you luck, Terminex.

The moment of compression ends. Tinnath, I offer you good-bye and good fortune.

Oregon blinked again as the voice was swallowed by the anomaly. The image of the ovoid blurred to infinite facets. The scientist dropped to his knees, the bodies sprawled around him stirred with movements and small sounds of discomfort. "Tourmaline! Jade Blue!"

"Ooh. My head aches," Tourmaline sat up unsteadily and took Oregon's hand for support. "Is Terminex—?"

"Gone?—Yes, forever."

She smiled shakily. "Tinnath, you're a wizard."

"Me?" Oregon said. "Hardly. Let Terminex be the last wizard."

"And so it was," said Jade Blue. "Look about you." Oregon noticed then that the smooth, cold metal of the domed chamber had been replaced by gravel chips. He slowly arose and then helped Tourmaline to her feet. They stood in a desolate wasteland.

Running ahead of them, Cafter faced them. "Look behind you," he said. "Terminex saved us a long walk." They turned and saw the city in the distance. "See there?" said Jade Blue, indicating. "Smoke."

"And as though Cinnabar's Park is burning," said Cafter, "as well as other districts."

For a moment there was no sound, no movement among them as they stared at one another.

"Let's go home," Oregon said.

## CODA:

It weaves through the warp of the desert; a dusty trail looping around wind-eroded buttes, over dry stream beds, among clumps of gray scrub brush. Straighter, but always within sight of the roadway, is the elevated train track. No trains have run in centuries and the track is streaked with verdigris. Though there are seldom travelers to hear it, the wind in the trestles shudders and whistles.

Closer to the city, the road is lined with burned-out shells of what were once buses.

Then comes the greenbelt, a mile-wide sward of grass and trees no longer tended by small silent machines.

At last the city. Cinnabar is a firm of glass towers and metal walls perched atop dice crumbling down to a narrow band of beach and then to ocean.

The desert. The greenbelt. The city. The sea. There seems very little more to the world. The elevated railroad is rumored to run to a place called Elys. But no one is quite sure, no one remembers ever having traveled so far.

Today a quartet trudges along the road to Cinnabar. (Once there are five; but elsewhere and elsewhere a singularity divulges a point; and that point generates a line; and the line generates a plane, which rotates into a solid and there you are, Torre.)

First, Jade Blue. She knows with utter sureness that a litter of kittens, cats and real, awaits her in the city.

Second, Cafter. He has earned his own individualness; been given uniqueness. He knows he is his own . . . man.

Third, Tourmaline. Another adventure completed. But with the accumulation of sensations, something more lasting is catalogued. She had not yet told Oregon that she wishes him to bear her child.

Fourth, Oregon. He has gathered the information he desired, but he has also discovered a conclusion greater than the sum of his inputs, he possesses heart as well as mind.

A catmother and a simulacrum and a woman and a man, they approach the city. Cinnabar waits. ○

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## Spirit of '76 from page 21

hundredth. It hasn't come true, has it? Democracy is still here, if only here. A few decades ago it was said that the Swiss were the ones to watch... but their downfall was restricting the voting to only men, then to only women, then to neither.

Yes, Democracy is voting. The freedom to vote is important, even if the subject voted on seldom is. In the U.S.A. anyone can vote, over the age of fifteen and under the age of sixty. I shall, in a few years, be disenfranchised myself. Not that I'll mind—I'll be glad to be free of the awesome responsibility. That reminds me—we must all be prepared to vote next week. It will be a great display of democracy in action, won't it? During the Fair, our envious tourist friends will watch us go through the motions of voting, casting our ballots in the historic manner. Study the old newspapers again—we must be letter-perfect. To make it even more realistic this year, we have printed up authentic-looking ballots for you to use. An election will be carried out each Tuesday during the summer months.

In conclusion, I ask that you—we, who represent our great nation, as great as ever though diminished in size from the sprawling megastate that stretched from sea to sea in the twentieth century, we must show our way of life in its best light. We must prove by our very existence the truth of the prophetic words of our great President Lincoln—that this government of the people, by the people and for the people, has not perished from the Earth!

## ADVANTAGE

by F. M. Busby

**F**laming, the ruins collapsed, the last survivors perished. Watching the gutting embers the one said, "You win again, I thought I could sustain this sequence, but you out-manuevered me."

Gesturing in self-deprecation, the other laughed. "Once you introduced large groupings, the idea of politics was inevitable."

"I admit you have a real talent for destructive concepts."

The other said, "I admire your attempt to turn my construct to your own use—and you came close to success—but with all due respect, the materials at hand gave me no real chance of winning."

"True," said the one. "The poor grade of operational subjects handicapped me. Perhaps we should adjust the betting odds."

"No. They are the same for both of us." The other paused and took refreshment. "Do you wish to discuss, further, this latest exercise?"

"Not at all," said the one. "It is self-evident. Let us cast for roles."

"Agree?" The tokens rolled, and gave their verdict.

"You see?" said the other. "I told you..."

"Yes. It's about time, too. This turn, Yahweh, you have to build the Universe and I get to be the bad guy!"

## Selecting Your Edaphosaurs

When you go to select the Edaphosaurs that it is just right for you there are certain things to bear in mind.

Little Edaphosaurs come from eggs, as do lizards, alligators, platyfish and most other reptiles, and are fully capable of taking care of themselves almost immediately after they break through their shells. Most prospective owners prefer to obtain young Edaphosaurs, as it cannot be denied that much of the joy of having one of these charming and remarkable animals lies in watching it grow from a six-centimeter-long lizard with a rudimentary spinal ridge to a ten-meter-long adult with a sail as colorful as any peacock's tail feathers. (See *Caring for Your Peacock*, C.R. Pets Manual No. 87.)

Some people even go so far as to buy Edaphosaurs eggs in order to witness the miracle of hatching. However, if you choose to buy an unhatched Edaphosaur, it is strongly suggested that you obtain it from an authorized dealer of unquestionable integrity, as the eggs of the Edaphosaurs are virtually indistinguishable from those of certain North American Vipers. (See *Caring for Your Vipers*, C.R. Pets Manual No. 143.)

## Preparing a Home for Your Edaphosaur

When you get home with the Edaphosaur of your choice, you should already have prepared a place for it. Pet owners with large houses often assemble prefabricated glass cases complete with temperature regulators, a basking rack, a belly-slide, real dirt and a wallowing

pool with simulated pebble-lined bottom and artificial stagnant water. These materials are obtainable from your local pet dealer.

The apartment dweller can, on the other hand, do just as well with some plastic boards, wet newspapers and a sun lamp. But it must be remembered that prolonged exposure to the rays of the sunlamp will prove harmful to your pet. The Edaphosaur, by virtue of its less sophisticated heart, is at the mercy of external temperatures, and you must take pains to see that it is neither too hot nor too cold.

**CAUTION:** If there are young people in your household, do not permit them to handle the Edaphosaurs' scales, as they are vital to the regulation of excess body heat.

turn page

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by Steven Utley

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45-S140

## NEIL'S UNIVERSE

from page 22

topic of an upcoming column.)

So, recommended for the beginning amateur is a six (or four) inch telescope, a reflector, equatorial stop an equatorial stand. The equatorial will not add much to the cost. In fact, most manufacturers do not offer the alta-zimuth.

Whatever the stand, make sure it is a steady one! Remember that every time the stand vibrates or moves, that movement will be magnified by the scope and ruin your observing.

Next month, I'll tell you a little about accessories for your scope. These range from such absolutely needed items as eyepieces to some hot rod luxury items such as variable frequency drives.

Following is a short list of telescope

manufacturers. It is not a complete list by any means, but it is representative. Many offer free catalogs, or at a nominal cost, which you may browse through at your leisure.

NEXT MONTH: Telescope Accessories

Astrola, Cave Optical Co., 4137 Anaheim St., Long Beach, Calif. 90804 (catalog—\$100)

Edmund Scientific Co., 300 Edscorp Building, Barrington, New Jersey 08007 (catalog-free)

Star-Liner Co., 1106 S. Columbus Blvd., Tucson, Ariz. 85711 (catalog—45)

Criterion Manufacturing Co., 620 Oakwood Ave., West Hartford, Conn. 06110 (catalog-free)

Unitron, 66 Neatham St., Newton Highlands, Mass. 02161 (catalog-free) O

## EDAPHOSAURUS

It is not likely that you will succeed in house-breaking your Edaphosaurus. However, your pet's living space can be kept fresh and scrupulously clean by certain Permian insects, available at your local pet store. (See *Caring for Your Crocodiles*, C.R. Pets Manual Supplement K.)

## Feeding Your Edaphosaurus

Edaphosaurus of the Permian Period generally subsist on a diet of bullfrogs, catfish and ferns. If you can get your pet to eat these, you can get your pet to have time to grow them yourself (See *Caring for Your Paleozoic Plants*, C.R. Pets Manual Supplement N), do so. Otherwise, substitute celery, lettuce, cauliflower and melons in season.

Your pet's appetite will begin to slack off noticeably by the time it is six months old. After this, it is recommended that you feed your pet as much as it wants whenever it wishes to eat. Do not be alarmed if your Edaphosaurus falls asleep after such feasts and remains unconscious for a day or more. It is merely digesting its dinner.

Feed it several pebbles a month. These are for its gizard.

Do not be alarmed if your pet's teeth keep falling out. As its teeth are worn down, they will be shed automatically, and new teeth will grow in to replace them. This will go on for the life of the Edaphosaurus.

## Breeding Your Edaphosaurus

If you choose to mate your Edaphosaurus, it is strongly suggested you consult an authorized breeding service. It is of utmost importance that a qualified expert handle this important matter, as the unknowing pet owner might otherwise attempt to breed his Edaphosaurus with a Dimetrodon. (See *Caring for Your Dimetrodon*, C.R. Pets Manual No. 170.)

Now that you have become one of the thousands of Edaphosaurus owners, you can look forward to years of fun and fascination with your pet, for there is surely no more touching love than that which exists between a person and a pelycosaur.

## I'M NOT SURE I WANT TO GO TO THE FUTURE

by William Rotzler

I don't know if I want to go to the future. For one thing, no one ever goes to the bathroom. I don't think I can hold out that long.

What I'm referring to, of course, is science fiction. In the world of the near-future, the future, and the far future no one goes to the potty, they rarely fornicate, and if they do it is "off camera." The only television programs are either startling world-shaking announcements, news which mention "something pertinent to the plot, or the "pornography" channel. Few magazines are published, no fiction at all, and only rarely is an advertisement mentioned.

In the "old" science fiction, the pulps of the Thirties and Forties, the bug-eyed monster kept carrying off the girl, which I always thought very odd. Was he some kind of interstellar pervert? Why didn't he carry off a nice aloof-eyed sheep or a houseplant? It was never said what he planned to do with her, true, but sex was never far from our thoughts in those days. He (it?) could have just as easily been planning to eat her. Or maybe it was a she and had some kind of other perversion in mind.

Obviously, fiction deals with drama and

there isn't much that is dramatic about a man coming home on the monorail (aerobically, jet-lag, tube, teleport, transcontinental rocket) after a hard day at the office (processing algae, spot-welding buffers, flying to the moon, matter duplicating, tending a fusion torch) and sitting down before the wallscreen to watch an evening of television (moon-quake collapse Dome #785, I Love Robot 7, CBS Reports on the underwater cities of the Mediterranean, The Astrology Game, a new sitcom about a widowed Solar News reporter and her adventures on Mars, Space Station Four, Interplanetary Cop, or a documentary on the Transatlantic tunnel).

There just isn't a helluva lot of excitement about the underwater cities of their mutated tiger cub getting up a tree or the lousy soyalgae school

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lunches. Isn't terribly interesting about his wife's troubles with the atomic disposal, the robots that have moved in down the block, the dress she bought by cable television that came in the wrong shade of "Velvet Venusian" because the wall-screen color balance was off. There isn't much interest in the bills for protein allotment, the kids school airbus tickets, or his arcollogical structure apartment rent.

He'll complain about taxes and all the money going into the Mars project, or the way the new half-mile high arcol building blocks their view of the mountains, or how today's kids are unmanageable.

That's the way life may be in the near-future, but that just isn't the stuff of high drama, and I understand that. But some of the realities of life should enter into fiction. Beds and bathrooms, the taste of the food, the boredom of long rocket trips, the fact that people are not robots and are alive and will react illogically and even insanely, but without being plot tumors.

I don't want an antiseptic future, I want it full of juices, contradictions, unexplained events, triumphs that are personal and minor, tragedies that are not world-shaking. Societies don't crumble because of one man. They aren't built because of one man or woman and they won't collapse because of one.

No one reads books in future fiction, or rarely, which seems very strange considering writers do the writing. (Ever notice in mundane fiction and drama how often the writer is the protagonist, or at least the amused/detached/alof observer?)

The woman never had menstrual periods and no one ever cools, only "dials" a dinner. The men don't have back trouble, diarrhea, constipation, prostrate conditions, eye trouble or kidney diseases. The women vaginal got breast cancer, hernagals, nerverg, infections, or wash their hair.

I'm not sure I want to go to the future, even if my personal time machine is dragging me along at the rate of one second per second. Not if the future is their-kind of future.

Writing is the essence of selection, a process of distillation. It is not necessary to list a hero's skin blemishes, dry/oily hair condition, his taste in clothes, or his reading preferences in order to write a perfectly good story. But when science fiction writers ignore some of the juices of reality I think they've blown it. (Lost contact, uncoupled their minds, fucked up, tumbled their cores, scrambled their main program, unplugged their brains.)

The future will be more than we can imagine, and less. It's always been different than the professional guessers have suggested, and always wider than their predictions.

But people still go to the bathroom, pick their noses, and like sex, even if they are grown in test tubes. Unless RNA, and similar research can breed everything out of genes but the desire to rescue heroines, run off to other solar systems, and look brave, we will be human. The future may lie ahead, but which one?

## THE LAST TEN MICRO NOVELS

by William Jon Watkins

FIELD REPORT, FIFTH EXPEDITION  
FIRST SHIPMENT OF ARTIFACTS

The ten sheets of Admantine shipped between were found in the cornerstones of the Antiquarian Archives and are thought to date from the early 21st century. The markings have not yet been deciphered. Similar markings were found on the cornerstone itself and have been reproduced below for your convenience:

THIS STONE CONTAINS THE LAST TEN MICRO-NOVELS WRITTEN BY THE HAND OF MAN. EACH RESEMBLES A MAJOR GENRE WITHIN WHAT HAS SURVIVED AS LITERATURE. OF THE ANTIQUARIAN

SOCIETY ARE PROBABLY THE LAST HUMAN BEINGS CAPABLE OF READING THEM. EXCEPT, WE HOPE, FOR YOU WHO OPEN THIS STONE.

NOTE: Sheets were numbered in order in which they were uncovered.

### SHEET ONE

#### THE LAST MAD SCIENTIST STORY

We told them a pound of it would make a crater a thousand miles deep, probably knock the planet out of orbit.

He gave them twenty-four hours to make a permanent peace. Top level advisors said he was bluffing. An top level assassin shot him in the head. An hour ago something in his safe started ticking.

### SHEET TWO

#### THE LAST TIME TRAVEL STORY

The mind police think he defected to the other side because he knew they were planning to kill him. They always thought he was a security risk. They have interrogated his sister into a twitching silence and now they're sure. What they can't understand is, Why their agents keep disappearing.

### SHEET THREE

#### THE LAST TOTALITARIAN STATE STORY

Facing the microphones down like cobras, he announced unequivocally that there was no society of little men, no espionage, no security leaks, serving enemies of the state with secret weapons. He stated absolutely

that there was no such thing as mind control. Then he put the gun in his mouth and scattered his brains all over the great seal of the empire.

### SHEET FOUR

#### THE LAST ECO-DISASTER STORY

Off Sandy Hook, New Jersey a dish of sewage thirty feet thick slid slowly with the tide like the bubble in a level gliding slowly to the left. On one side of the bubble eight million people free of typhus slept without thinking. On the other side an equal number of commuters slept fitfully dreaming of plague.

### SHEET FIVE

#### THE LAST AFTER-TECHNO-DISASTER STORY

No dogs in the streets. No cats. No birds. No people. Air like a bad cough. And flies everywhere. Cars wouldn't run. Lights wouldn't work. Meat went bad, water went worse. Air got thick. People made the best of it — They died.

### SHEET SIX

#### THE LAST AFTER-TECHNO-HOLOCAST STORY

On the melted turnpike sign two hundred miles west of a glowing that does not go out, a seven-fingered hand rests.

### SHEET SEVEN

#### THE LAST INTERSTELLAR WAR STORY

One flash for the recreation center at Gomorrah, One for the ammunition dump at Sodam. In the newshunts on Betelgeuse IV, half a line with the names spelled wrong.

### SHEET EIGHT

#### THE LAST DISSENTANT ALIEN STORY

"I see you now," said Turnk, boarding the saucer, "only as bags of water breaking one another."

### SHEET NINE

#### THE LAST FIRST-CONTACT STORY

When Mount Palomar had plotted all the major stars in the galaxy as microdots on a big screen, it looked like an eye squinting earthward.

### SHEET TEN

#### THE LAST MICRO-NOVEL

Every micro-novel is a time capsule. All it ever says is: "I was here. This is what I looked like. Remember me." The time capsule is always dug up by a dog. The dog always belongs to someone who can't read. He uses the paper for a fire. He thinks the markings are stupid. The dog thinks so too. O



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